The Deadly Agent Affair
By Sepia

THE DEADLY AGENT AFFAIR

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Chapter 1
“Remove that base immediately!”

“Have you heard from Illya, Sir?”

“A communications blackout is in force at the moment. But, I can assure you, Mr Solo, that he is being closely monitored.” A small smile flickered and died as Waverly glanced into the face of his chief enforcement officer, Napoleon Solo. Concern for his partner was obvious and despite the enchanting smile directed at the woman who handed him a file, a deep frown furrowed his brow.

“Who’s doing backup?”, he asked watching the woman as she left the office.

“*Emergency, channel D, code 7 call, we have an emergency…*”

“What is the nature of your emergency, Mr Slate?” asked Waverly already putting into action backup plan B. “Have your teams ready! Emergency backup grid point 456…”

“*We are surrounded… They have us pinned down… Cannot get to Illya…*”

“… London NW… Grid point 456, give instant assistance…” Solo continued to instruct the backup team as Waverly tried to hold the signal from Mark Slate. “Do not let him out of your sight… I repeat, it is imperative that Mr Kuryakin does ***not*** fall into Thrush hands… Mr Slate, are you receiving me… Answer please, Mr Slate…” A static hum was all that came from the communicator and one long burst of gunfire. Waverly sighed and closed the link, his slow thoughtful pacing brought Solo back into action.

“What is Illya carrying, Sir?” he asked glancing at his watch.

“*Was* I suspect, Mr Solo. If Thrush have him then U.N.C.L.E. is in a great deal of danger…”

“Illya won’t talk…” Solo said sitting on the edge of the table and glancing anxiously towards the communications array.

“Oh, but he *will*, Mr Solo…” he leaned towards the agent and slamming his cane hard on the table continued angrily, “… You young men seem to think you are indestructible. So far you have been lucky…”, he sighed deeply and lowered his voice so that he sounded almost gentle. “Not this time, young man. The people that I suspect to have Mr Kuryakin are known for their methods of interrogation… He *will* talk, Mr Solo, he will have no choice.”

A searing pain caused Slate to drop the communicator and he watched helplessly as it dropped out of sight into a patch of nettles. The bullet had luckily only removed skin from the back of his hand and until that moment not one shot had been fired in his direction. THRUSH were concentrating all their firepower on one small blond agent they had pinned behind the dubious shelter of a rotten shed. Rapping a handkerchief around his hand to protect it from more injury Slate groped blindly through the stinging plants. He must find the communicator and verify that backup was on its way. Glancing back toward the shed he sighed deeply, any backup was going to come too late. Kuryakin had signalled that he was on his last clip and now he was totally surrounded.

As Slate’s hand finally grasped the cold metal of the pen he smiled sadly back at Kuryakin and signalled again, checking the Russian’s latest signal. Almost as if the young man was heading only for a business meeting, he looked across to Slate and pointed to his open mouth and nodded without any sign of emotion. Slate mimicked someone cutting their throat and frantically shook his head. Relief flooded through him as a thin smile traced across the Russian’s face and he mouthed the word ‘*no*’.

Flashing florescent lights of every shape and colour whirled before Mark Slate’s eyes, one brief moment of pain accompanied the spectacular pyrotechnical display. Before the lights faded into the black abyss of unconsciousness he saw Kuryakin fire his final round, place a finger in his

mouth and remove the cap from one of his teeth and bite down. Calmly, he stood hands raised, to face the inevitable.

"We've got Illya's location, Sir," a soft female voice spoke.

"Go ahead," murmured Waverly already walking over to the large map on the wall. For one brief moment Solo watched the woman, her tight skirt fully revealing her perfect shape underneath, the usual smile only hovered for a moment then died as his mind pulled back to the subject closest to his mind. Even the seductive tone in her voice failed to gain the usual second look.

"Slate's trace is located at L 456, static. The backup team is five minutes away…"

"And Illya?" asked Solo tracing an outline on the map.

"Up until a few moment ago he was moving. Now he's static at L 483." Solo couldn't fail to notice the sadness and fear in her voice and automatically shrugged his shoulders. The Solo charisma would not work on this woman, his partners aloof blue-eyed magnetism had already won.

"Strike unit U4 proceed immediately to L483 and…" said Waverly almost matter-of-factly.

"*Sir?*" questioned Solo.

"This location has been under our surveillance for some time. On the outside an ordinary isolated farmhouse, on the inside a Thrush Satrap… U4, remove that base immediately…"

"Sir, you can't do that!" once again Solo interrupted. The pleading look in the girl's eyes had done nothing to influence his insubordination, some other deep down impulse made him place his hand over the microphone and prevent Waverly from sending out the order.

"Are you questioning my authority?"

"No, well yes, Sir, I am, Illya's in there!"

“And that is the main reason for destroying that base. I can’t have that young man reveal our secrets no matter what you think…”

“I can get him out…” Solo’s grip tightened on the microphone.

“No, Mr Solo, not this time. By the time you get to England… Even by the time the backup team gets to that base it will already be too late.” A grip that to Solo should have come from a man half the age of Waverly wrenched the microphone from his grasp. “U4, remove that base.”

“Slate on the line, Sir,” the girl almost shouted yet her eyes never left the map and the thin red line showing the plane U4 was fast approaching L 483 and Kuryakin, bomb doors already open.

“Your report please,” the old man sounded angry and his grey eyes fixed on Solo with almost distain.

“Mr Waverly, stop the backup team from coming into this area…” said Slate. Solo had worked with Slate more than once and trusted his insight. Quickly he instructed the team to remain at a distance even before Slate could finish his sentence.

“I was knocked out from behind and for some reason left. I have a Thrush uniform and pass.”

“What are your intentions?” asked Waverly already knowing the answer.

“Illya has taken L-Pill 12…” The shudder that ran through Solo was noticed by Waverly as was the beads of sweat and the tightly clenched fist; the very mention of the L-Pill was every agent’s dread.

“Why they labeled this substance in the L group I have no idea. What it has done, Mr, um, Solo is given us more time!” A low sigh of relief came from Solo as Waverly spoke again. “U4, stand down and await further orders. For your information, Mr Solo, the substance Mr Kuryakin has taken is an experimental drug that counteracts the affects of sodium pentathol. I am yet to be shown the good effects of this; Thrush will use other methods to extract the information. Mr Slate, continue please.”

“I can get in, Sir. I still have all my special equipment so expect a rescue soon.”

“*Wait!*” said Solo again grabbing the microphone. “Think for a moment, why aren’t you captive too? I smell a trap, Mark!”

“It appears as if they assumed I was only an inferior agent. From the outset they left me well alone and at the end I think they believed I was dead.”

“Watch your back, Mark,” Solo warned.

“And er, Mr Slate, use the earpiece and tiepin in place of the pen communicator, this way you will be able to keep us informed at all times. And… if, ahem, Kuryakin gives the slightest hint that he is about to inform…”

“Yes, Sir, I know the procedure… Napoleon, before you start, it won’t come to that.”

Chapter 2
Kuryakin 424046

“Illya, you adorable boy, you really should let me style your hair.” The sickly sweet voice reached into the deep recesses of his brain and recognition brought him back to consciousness.

“Roma, we seem to have had this conversation before, and my answer was?”

“You never did like me, did you?” she said sadly.

“No.”

“Now be good and tell Aunty Roma all about the top ten London missions.”

“Naughty, you’ve been moonlighting. Does Mark know about your other job?” Despite his usual calm appearance a flicker of worry flashed across his mind as he tried in vain to move. The metal board held him upright giving him a good view of the whole room. Heavy metal clips held his hands and feet firmly by a strong electro-magnetic force. The board ended at his neck making it difficult to relax, letting his head drop back caused the edge of the board to cut painfully into the back of his head. It wasn’t the girl that caused his apprehension, nor the presence of the masochistic Thrush thugs but the laps of memory, the red needle marks in his arm and the dull ache in the back of his head. From the moment he had entered the building until Roma’s sugary voice had grazed his hearing, he could remember nothing. Now, even though she was silent he could still hear her, faint, far away and talking so fast not one word could be isolated from another. She walked around the room, her red hair falling in artificial curls upon her slender shoulders and as she did, seemingly as a reward for some deed yet to come, each Thrush thug received a gentle caress as she passed. *Aphrodite*, thought Illya, the perfect Goddess to entice Solo or Slate.

“Illya,” she said stroking his face with the back of her hand. “Tell me and then I won’t let the beastly men hurt you.”

“You’re out of luck, lady,” he replied turning his head to avoid her weak backhanded slap. He began to focus his mind on everything in the room, picking out words written on doors and numbers on buttons. He used everything he saw to form puzzles to occupy his brain and prepare for whatever had been planed for him. Momentarily he was distracted by one large red button on the wall facing him, this one was a puzzle in itself. ***‘In case of sluicing, push here.’***

“Burn him!” Her voice dropped an octave to become harsh, deep and menacing. Then she smiled and touched his face as he sort out the capped tooth with his tongue.

“We are not that cruel, Illya. Do you honestly think we would let you take you own life?”

His tongue found only the empty hole where the Lethal Pill had once sat.

Waverly was right, thought Slate as he walked purposefully into the room. They hadn’t had Illya in their possession long and already he was showing signs of giving in. One glance around the room told Slate that attempting to remove the Thrushmen would result only in his death and leave Illya without help. He carefully adjusted the earpiece that held him in contact with Waverly and moved closer to Illya.

Recognition was acknowledged by brief eye-contact and Slate had to concentrate hard not to betray his feelings of anger as a heavily built Thrush yob worked on Illya.

“The names,” he asked grinning. Slate could only think by looking at his delighted expression that he would resent Illya spoiling his fun by talking.

“I don’t know.” Blood seeped from his clenched fists as his nails bit into his flesh and Slate noticed his whole body tightened in agony yet all the Thrushman had done was run a small metal stick over his chest.

“Kuryakin 424…No!”

“Name.”

“Kuryakin 42404…” A thin cry escaped his lips and he looked straight at Slate. “Please!” he whispered.

“Once again, name.”

“Ok, ok… Kuryakin 424046… Number two Section two… U.N.C.L.E. New York… 424046…”

“That young man cannot stand much more,” Waverly said into the microphone to Slate but his eyes addressed Solo and the others in the office. The goings on at the Thrush base where being relayed through Slate’s tiepin and news had travelled fast. Several Section Two agents had congregated and whispered comments occasionally reached Solo’s ears. Kuryakin had been in Thrush hands for a very short time and already was cracking, if nothing else he was losing the respect he had so rightfully earned over the years. The other Section Two agents regarded him as the man most likely not to talk while under pressure. He could endure pain while others would scream.

“Mr Slate, do not allow him to talk and believe me he is on the verge of doing just that.”

“Not Illya, Sir,” Solo said loudly. “He has endured much more for far longer without uttering a word.”

“Has he Mr Solo? Have you, have any of you? I somehow think not.”

“Why are you so certain, you seem to know exactly what is happening at that base.”

“I think I do, Mr Solo, but I pray I am wrong.”

“Let’s take it up more,” said the Yob his face flushed red with sheer pleasure and he walked towards the main group of Thrushmen who where operating various machines. Slate took the opportunity the instant he did to get closer to Illya.

“Hang in there, just think of some nice science project.”

“Ro… Ro… Rom…” stuttered Illya and Slate frowned.

“Do you mean Rome, Illya?” A weak shake of the head was the only answer.

“Don’t tell them, Illya and don’t tell me either.”

“I can’t take any more, help me,” pleaded Kuryakin. Slate coughed slightly, in all the years he’d known the Russian he had never heard him ask for help.

“Illya, you have to concentrate. Everything they are doing is in your mind…”

“Fire, acid… boiling oil… Mark, you don’t have to pretend, I know what I look like… I can smell it…”

“Look at your arm… Illya, please just look… Don’t make me do this,” he said briefly showing Kuryakin a tiny needle.

One look was enough for him to know he would never hold a gun again and if his arm looked like that then so must his legs, he would never run again or walk for that matter. He moaned and the Yob laughed as he walked back towards him. Slate moved behind Illya hoping for another chance to talk to him, it never came. As the Yob touched the metal stick on Illya’s face a sob of agony could be heard.

“Ok, no more… No more… First London mission is at…” His body jerked slightly then stiffened until every muscle in his body contracted, a smile widened into a grin as the contractions contorted his face and as Slate removed the tiny hypodermic he whispered, “I’m sorry, Illya.”

Chapter 3
“That wasn’t cyanide, was it, Sir?”

For what seemed an eternity the office remained silent apart from the strike of a match and a long drawn out sigh as Waverly inhaled the smoke from his pipe. Solo remained seated on the edge of the table with his hand subconsciously pulling at the corner of his mouth.

“That wasn’t Cyanide, was it, Sir?” whispered one of the newer Section Two agents. Waverly tapped the contents of his pipe into a small bowl and refilled it with fresh tobacco then replaced the pipe unlit to his lips. “Yes,” he finally replied walking to the window without looking at the gathered agents.

“***No!***” Solo whispered without changing his position and his thoughts were echoed by every agent. Finally the inevitable had happened, one of U.N.C.L.E.’s best had succumbed to Thrush’s torture and the dreaded L-Pill had come into play. The partnership of Kuryakin and Solo was at an end.

“Better call Mark back before his cover is blown and we lose another agent,” said Solo suddenly standing. To the gathered agents he looked taller than usual and as they would have expected Kuryakin to react in this situation, unmoved by the death of his partner.

“I’m sure there must be plenty of work for you all to do,” said Waverly removing a small paper flag from the map. Instead of placing it in his draw he placed it gently in Solo’s hand. “I suggest Justin Crawshaw as your partner…”

“No, Sir…”

“*Again*, Mr Solo? You wish to go against my direct orders?”

“No, Sir.” Solo was in no mood to start an argument with Waverly but to partner him with Crawshaw was the final straw. “At the moment I would rather work alone…”

“*Impossible!* I do know of Crawshaw’s dislike of um, Kuryakin, but he is the next in line and I’m sure, in time, things will work out.”

“Yes, Sir, I’m sure they will.” Without looking back Solo walked the corridor that suddenly seemed endless and empty. Only when he entered the elevator did he let his feelings out and he slammed a fist at the wall causing the pin of the little flag to stab into his skin. Screaming might have removed some of the horror he felt at that moment but his credibility as the imperturbable agent would have gone. He felt incredible anger at Mark Slate for having administered the L-Pill, anger at Waverly for partnering him with the brash, egotistical Crawshaw and grief at Kuryakin’s death. No, that too was anger, an incredible fury at the way he had died. He opened his hand slowly and carefully placed the tiny flag inside his wallet. Then he left the elevator and smiling at the nearest pretty girl walked over to the waiting Crawshaw.

Chapter 4
Slate is Sweeney Todd

Forestalling the kill was part of the training. Only when unavoidable was another life to be taken; maim first or tranquillise. Although this was the theory, Mark Slate had been forced to kill before, yet never had he felt as he did now. His heart thumped against his ribs and beat so fast he had to breath deeply to try slowing it down. Legs had become like jelly and his hands refused to stop trembling. This was his first personal kill and he suddenly felt like a murderer. Waverly's words still echoed in the earpiece, 'mission accomplished', was that all this was? A mission to kill a man who over the years he had come to respect and like. In one brief moment he had done what many high ranking Thrush agents had strived to do, eliminate U.N.C.L.E.'s number two agent.

Regardless of the danger Slate knew he had to do one more thing before leaving and that was salute the young man who's life had been lived only for U.N.C.L.E.. The Thrush Yob was only feet away from him and laughing with the other masochists. The air was suddenly filled with a party atmosphere and Slate was overcome with the desire to massacre all within that room. His face blushed red with fury and he stood tall as he turned

towards Kuryakin, his hand already rising for a salute. He never managed to raise the arm, which remained frozen. Illya's eyes seemed to be watching him. It wasn't the usual indifferent stare that was so typical of the Russian, this was full of hate and anger. Slate's mouth dropped open and a small gasp left his lips as he noticed that those eyes followed him, never blinking yet fixed whichever way Slate moved, the shallow rise and fall of the chest said everything, Illya was alive.

As if they were twelve year old playground bullies the Thrushmen formed a huddle in the corner of the room and proceeded to laugh and point. Then the Yob moved behind Illya and almost tenderly removed two wires from the back of his head.

"You can take him now, Slate."

Trying to conceal the fact that his name was known he played ignorant. "Where would you like me to take him, Sir?"

"Why back to U.N.C.L.E. of course."

"Dump him on the doorstep like the last one?" asked Slate.

"Slate, oh my dear, Slate. This has been so entertaining. The drug you gave him wasn't cyanide but a substitution. The effect of that drug mixed with others and a touch of mind erasure has permanently damaged poor Kuryakin's brain. Nothing remains of him. Now take him before I change my mind and kill you both."

Solo was puzzled the instant he saw them leave the plane. Waverly hadn't briefed him about Slate obviously having undergone a severe Thrush beating. Then there was the question why Kuryakin was in handcuffs and held by two large airport security guards.

"They really worked you over didn't they, Mark," he said pointing to the deep scratches on his face and the blood spattered shirt.

"No, Napoleon, they did not, our friendly little Russian did fine by himself." Solo could only whistle as he watched Illya land another kick on the shin of one of the heavily bruised guards.

"He looks fine. Better than you. What exactly caused the battle?" asked Solo.

"He tried to hijack the plane. I said no, so he bit me. He made it to the cabin and broke the pilots thumb by bending it back…"

"*Enough!"* Solo said jumping back as a kick headed his way. "Is this the effects of the drugs?"

"Total mind obliteration is what they told me. At the moment all he will do is shout abuse. I really blew it this time. I have finally gained his full hate."

"Pareekmahyrer, Pareekmahyrer!" shouted Illya as he again tried to reach Slate.

“Illya, listen to me, we know what they put you through and…”

“Ya nye paneema yoo!”

“Yes you *do* understand, Illya. Mark…”

“Pareekmahyrer, paree…”

“Illya, he *had* to do it. I would have done the same…”

“Ya nye paneema yoo.”

“How long has been doing this?” asked Solo.

“From the moment I took him out of that base. All he seems to be able to do is speak Russian and as I don’t, the conversation has been limited.”

“Pareekmahyrer!”

“He’s not a barber, Illya, he…” said Solo

“Da!”

“Oh, he is a barber? Like the Fleet Street Barber? Oh, *boy* have I upset him!” said Slate scowling.

“Ok, Sweeney Todd, let’s get him home before the aircrew pluck up enough courage to get their revenge,” said Solo trying to cover the severity of the situation by making a joke.

“Da, Sweeney! Zavoot, Zavoot!”

“Yes, Illya, Slate is Sweeney Todd. He tried to make you into pie. Just smile and nod your head, Mark.”

For several hours he had paced the cage, his head lowered and his eyes on the prey that hid behind the safety of metal bars. Every so often a low growl vibrated in his throat as the only indication that one of his captors had been recognised. Only this was neither an ordinary cage nor the captive any species of wildcat, this was a roomy, comfortable U.N.C.L.E. holding cell and the captive was Illya.

“Is there any progress?” asked Napoleon Solo.

“We have given him a week for any drugs to wear out of his system. I’m sorry Mr. Solo, but as the doctor has told you on more than one occasion, there is no hope.” Waverly shook his head sadly, to see one of his agents in this kind of condition was tragic. “At least he appears not to be in any pain. But everything that made him the man he was has been removed. Any good that was there is gone. What we have is a pure Russian gangster.”

For a while they stood in silence as they listened to the Doctor talking to Illya through a loudspeaker. Slate leaned heavily against the bars and sighed heavily.

“This was not your fault, young man,” said Waverly sensing the deep guilt within Slate.

“So I keep being told, but how could Thrush have substituted that drug. Even if I had been searched whilst unconscious it was hidden in my belt and as far as I could see the hypodermic was our own special make.”

“Forget it, Mark, and let’s try and get him back.” They now knew the importance of retrieving Illya’s mind, he had been working on three missions at once. Carrying a list of London’s top missions to New York as well as a list of Thrush’s top missions given him by a dying U.N.C.L.E. agent. Also he was working on some mission in London, known only to him and code named, ‘*Risen foam*.’ Slate had been given that assignment with the only clues to what the mission entailed being street names.

“What is Rome?” the voice in the loudspeaker continued. “Illya, can you hear me? Who is that man outside?”

“Let me try. Illya, who am I?” began Solo.

“Ya nye gavaryoo pa Angleeyskeey.”

“Yes you do, Illya, you speak English as good as me.”

“Better, that is the first thing you learn at Cambridge,” echoed Slate.

“Tell me who you are,” Solo said giving a sideways glower at Slate.

“Vi gavareetye pa Rooskiy?” asked Illya.

“Da, Illya, I speak Russian.”

“Phah!” spat Illya.

“Mark! Was that a retaliation?”

“Keep going, there was a spark of the old Illya there,” said Slate excitedly.

“Kak vas zavoot?” asked Solo.

“Kuryakin 424046… Number two Section two… U.N.C.L.E. New York… 424046…”

“Napoleon, *stop!* I know what’s wrong. He thinks we are the bad guys. For the last week he believes we have been interrogating him.”

Chapter 5
Russian revolution

It was a relief to Solo when only a mile from headquarters the call-back came. Crawshaw, however, was less than happy being re-called from his first mission. However minor this little foray was, it could have been the first step to permanently filling Kuryakin's shoes. He knew that given time Solo would come to respect him and be grateful that the partnership with the Russian had ended. A smile lit his face as he dreamed of the good times to come when he and Solo would hit the town for evenings of wine, women and entertainment.

"We believe that Thrush have used the same interrogation endured by Kuryakin on two more agents," said Waverly as soon as they walked into the room.

"With the same results?" asked Solo.

"Both dead I'm afraid," Waverly slowly turned pages on the report and sighed deeply. Solo couldn't help but notice dark rings under his eyes and for a moment the old man suddenly looked frail. That moment vanished as anger flushed his face to a healthy pink and the file was thumped onto the table. "In both cases the principal agent was tortured in full sight of his associate. The first… Um Jack Barnes…"

"Jack *Snake* Barnes?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr Solo. Tough as the man appeared he endured only minutes of torture before he died screaming."

Napoleon Solo winced at the thought; Snake had tolerated much during his long association with U.N.C.L.E. and bore numerous scars to tell of his narrow escapes.

"To continue, Mr Solo," said Waverly pulling Solo back from the brink of those sinister nightmares which lurk in the minds of all agents. "He said, before he died, that he was being repeatedly stabbed. Strangely, the autopsy report on this man and um…" Waverly picked up the file and read for

several minutes before remembering the other agent's name. "Gresham, yes, Peter Gresham… The autopsy shows that shock, in Barnes' case from loss of blood, to be the cause of death. Not one injury that would result in extensive blood loss could be found on either agent."

"Some new weapon that drains blood?"

"I'm afraid it appears as if these afflictions are all in the victims mind…"

"Voodoo, Sir?"

"As strange as this sounds I am almost inclined to believe that to be the answer. The agents witnessing the torture of their fellow agents have been so badly affected that they have left U.N.C.L.E."

"We all witness bad things at one time or another, that is part of our training."

"Remember, Mr Solo, the witnesses are primary agents seeing hardened men break down for no apparent reason. Possibly the purpose of this appalling exercise is to cause as much fear as possible among our agents…"

"So much so that they will leave our service or in Illya's case, destroy the mind."

"Exactly. I think our priority must be to discover exactly how Thrush are convincing their victims that they are being burnt, electrocuted and stabbed before we lose more agents…"

The alarms halted the conversation and two breathless, bruised, security agents ran into the office.

"Kuryakin just walked out of the building, sir!" said one reddening in the face on seeing Waverly's disapproving face.

"How on earth did you let him do that?" began Solo.

"Mr Solo, be realistic," said Waverly waving the security agents out with the only words of reproach being, "I expect more expertise in unarmed combat the next time. Um…As I was saying, Kuryakin has put into practice his escape techniques on more than one occasion. It was this organization that taught most of those techniques to him. I suspect he found escape from this building easy as no-one had orders to use lethal force."

“I’ll go and get him.”

“No, Mr Solo, I have other agents assigned to do that unpleasant job.”

A smile appeared on Solo’s face as he visualised the consequences the agents faced when trying to re-capture a reluctant Kuryakin.

“You will leave immediately for Paris and investigate Thrush’s new weapon.”

“I think it might be better if I bring Illya back…”

“Your assignment has been set. Losing my top agent is not what I had in mind.”

“Illya won’t hurt me…”

“In his present state of mind that is my top concern. Goodbye, Mr Solo.”

“Ya-see, Napoleon, no-one could figure it out. All the books proved that this little fellow was the only one in existence…”

Solo was in no mood for the bright one-sided conversation that had been almost constant during the last ten hours. He had grown so accustomed to Kuryakin and his limited conversation that Crawshaw had already become annoying. He knew though, that his life might depend on this partnership improving, yet, he found it difficult to even pretend to tolerate the boastful young man. Stories of his conquests with various women and daring missions only re-enforced Solo’s dislike of him.

The mission had gone wide of the mark from the start and the two agents still sat in the waiting room of the airport. An air crash had delayed all flights, then the weather had become so appalling that those delays were extended. Finding another flight had proved impossible and it was mutually agreed to wait it out. This unfortunately gave Solo time to muse over the recent happenings and worry began to trigger a headache. Kuryakin was out there somewhere! Not only had he escaped from U.N.C.L.E. but was also fully armed with stolen U.N.C.L.E. equipment. Most of which should never fall into the wrong hands, especially THRUSH. The Russian had no

memories of his life and no friends. He had nothing except the crazed notion that U.N.C.L.E. was corrupt and had imprisoned him. Solo could only hope that he had headed back to Russia and would perhaps live a long and happy life with the gypsies.

“And that’s how I solved the mystery of the blue beetle,” bragged Crawshaw.

“What?”

“It was only blue because…”

“Ok, I get it. Now let’s go over this mission agai…”

“Oh, look, riots in England again.” said Crawshaw.

“What?”

“Riots. See, on the TV,” said Crawshaw pointing to the small set on the wall. Anything was better than the prospect of yet another story of the brilliant exploits of Crawshaw and watching television just might take his mind off Kuryakin. He sat back and watched the small affray that was occurring outside 10 Downing Street in London. Angry crowds shouted abuse at each other as police tried to break up what appeared to be another student demonstration. A young girl caught Solo’s attention and brought back the spark of interest that had vanished from his life. Rays of light highlighted the rich auburn of her hair and he followed the contours of her body that showed so clearly through a dress that could only be worn by a few. Two large rings were the only things preventing the bottom half from detaching from the skimpy top. Raising her arms to hold up the ban-the-bomb poster revealed most of her long, golden legs…

His interest in her as a potential companion vanished as the camera zoomed in and the crackly microphone picked up her voice. She was speaking Russian, badly pronounced and painfully slow, but defiantly Russian. She was interpreting another person’s speech.

“He said you are nothing but scum. You are all spies here to infiltrate the British government…”

“*Sweeney!*” echoed a voice behind her.

“Go for it, kid!” shouted a man in the room with Solo. “*Kill* the Sweeney!” For a moment Solo didn’t quite know what to do, watch the riot on television where a small blond man had begun attacking the Policeman that always stood guard outside the Prime-Minister’s door or question the innocuous little bald man who’s encounter with a toothbrush was yet to happen. He decided on both as the man in the room was there to stay, at least until the show had finished. It was totally clear who the blond man was, but what he was doing was another question. Even as other members of the uniformed branch held him he lashed out, screaming his anger as the girl translated. The unfortunate who was on the other end of Kuryakin’s blows seemed more angry than surprised and shouted back, his words just audible over the commotion.

“Illya, you *idiot*! Six months of work and you blow it just like that. Six months of work down the drain.”

“He’s one of *ours*!” whispered Crawshaw. “The stupid Russian blew his cover! Go on pelt him. One thump from you and he will go down and stay down.”

“Oy!” shouted Solo and the bald man simultaneously. Not wanting the riot to spread to the airport Solo only warned Crawshaw with a look and decided it best to question the bald man. “What did he mean by *Sweeney*?”

“Well I’ll forgive him getting it mucked up and all that, being foreign and all. Looks like he’s after law and order. Sweeney Todd, you know?”

“No, sorry.”

“You foreign too? Thought so. Sweeney Todd, flying squad?”

“No I’m NOT foreign but I still don’t understand.”

“Rhyming slang, yes? Whatever you call then they is still Coppers, still the law! Sweeney is the law!” This was the excuse Solo had needed, such valuable information had to be delivered personally to Waverly regardless of Crawshaw’s opinion that calling it in would be sufficient.

Crawshaw was right and Waverly angrily reprimanded Solo for not calling the situation in as Mark Slate had so correctly done. Matters were made worse the instant Solo was told that Kuryakin had escaped from '*the Sweeney*' to make an immediate attack on one of the fancily dressed Beefeater guards at the Tower of London. Solo's laughter had been instantly quashed.

"I fail to see the humour, Mr Solo. Once again Kuryakin has displaced one of our undercover agents. I can see a pattern forming even if you cannot."

"*The list!*" gasped a suddenly sober Solo. "He still remembers the list of English missions!"

"Exactly, Mr Solo, and he is systematically uncovering them. He must…"

"He remembers! Mr Waverly, I must…"

"No! You will follow orders and complete your assignment. Good day, Mr Solo!"

"Sir…" he sighed deeply and decided that Waverly was in no mood to be tackled further, insubordination of this kind would not be tolerated, even if it came from U.N.C.L.E.'s chief enforcement agent.

"He gave you a right slap on the wrist. I thought once you got to the top you shunned all that rubbish."

Only a shake of the head answered Crawshaw, Solo had more important matters on his mind. *He remembered the list*! The words were tossed over and over in his mind. THRUSH had told them that Kuryakin's mind had been destroyed yet he still remembered the list. Was that because it had been so deeply ingrained on his photographic memory or had THRUSH programmed him only to remember that list and act against it? The thought

was terrifiying, if they could brainwash certain agents to take action against U.N.C.L.E. then…

"He's at it again!" Crawshaw interrupted.

"What?"

"Kuryakin, he's at it again, listen!"

The Cold War edged closer to our shores today as London found itself the focal point of a Russian revolution. Solo tuned the radio in to eliminate any static and listened intently to the news-reader. Sometimes a smile forced itself upon him as the Russian's exploits were read out but was quickly removed as the seriousness of the situation became apparent.

Three people have been arrested in connection with the incident… photographs were shown of those arrested and Solo immediately called in to London HQ so that the young girl who had interpreted for Kuryakin be immediately release into U.N.C.L.E. hands for questioning. Only one other was known and Solo knew his release would be immediate, regardless of his alleged crime. Tying yourself to the railings of Buckingham Palace was not too uncommon but doing it nude was much more serious…

"Cricky! Isn't that Slate?"

"Yes, Mr Waverly, I suggest we place a D-Note on the whole situation…" Solo did not listen to the astonished ramblings of Crawshaw, the reputation of U.N.C.L.E. was at stake and the press must be silenced.

The perpetrator is still at large after gaining entrance to the Queen's private quarters and assaulting a member of the Royal kitchen staff…

"One of ours?"

"Not this time, I think… Now back to HQ to find out why Mark would want to pose nude for the cameras."

Chapter 6
Under a Burn Notice

“And what do you think Waverly will say when he finds out we are heading for England?”

Ignoring Crawshaw was starting to become a habit for Solo. He just wanted to be alone and try to figure out which way to go. Heading for England might solve a few puzzles.

“You’re risking your job because of one Russian renegade, not me, mate!”

“Have you any idea how many times Illya has risked *his* life to save *me*!” Solo cut himself short as an uncontrollable urge to hit Crawshaw forced him to place his clenched fists deep inside his pockets.

Once again Crawshaw was right and held a triumphant grin all through Solo's reprimand. On arrival at London HQ it was hardly a surprise to find Waverly already waiting for them. To Solo's dismay he had already interviewed the girl and Slate, leaving Solo with no reason to be there.

The girl was merely a student doing everything she could for the rights of the young. Rebelling against authority was normal and this was all she had done. She could say nothing about Kuryakin apart from the fact that he seemed desperate to be understood. Even speaking Russian she said that he just couldn't explain what his mission was apart from to remove the Sweeney. He frequently complained of severe headaches, most common when trying to explain what he needed to do.

Slate's story was confusing. He was patrolling the area found on a small scrap of paper, the area that Kuryakin had mentioned. Kuryakin had been on to something important yet he had told no one what it was apart from the code name **'Risen Foam'**. Slate and another agent where investigation every shop and building it the relatively small area. The only clue they had was the word Rome, so anything Italian was first on the list. No building nor person was connected with the name Risen Foam and as this area was relatively crime free the only Sweeney connection was a friendly policeman on a rusty bike.

They had followed this man while he completed his rounds, which consisted mostly of gossiping with the locals, cups of tea and slabs of heavy cake. They too invaded the small café to indulge in dark bitter tea and a bun that threatened to send all who attempted to eat it straight to the dentist. Slate and his partner became bored and decided to head for the relative comfort of the hair salon; here at least the tea was of the correct colour, the buns edible and the staff accommodating to most manly needs. Both could remember little else apart from a streak of light and the starry pain that comes moments before a blackout. They awoke to find themselves the centre of attention, cold and nude, their heads partially shaved, tide to the railing of Buckingham Palace. Each had a piece of cardboard covering some of their embarrassment with the words, ***Remove Sweeney,*** written in black paint.

“Surely, Mr Waverly, we can safely say that Illya’s hunt for the Sweeney doesn’t mean the Law.”

“And why do you come to that conclusion?” questioned Waverly

“The man at the Palace was kitchen staff…”

“If you read the reports instead of gallivanting about the countryside you would have noticed that he was an MI6 agent working undercover. Another Sweeney.”

“Sir, we are in trouble!” Slate burst into the office and proceeded to turn on the television. Although a D-Note was in force, this program had been recorded earlier and the editors considered it newsworthy. Somehow a reporter had found Kuryakin and with the help of an interpreter interviewed him.

“Are you a Russian spy?”

“Da, U. N. Cee. L. Eeee, He spelt it slowly and loudly.

“What is your mission?”

“Remove the Sweeney.”

Kuryakin proceeded to tell them that American spies had infiltrated certain government buildings with their objective being to assassinate those in charge and sell secrets to rival countries. Most of those spies were from

the organisation U.N.C.L.E. who where hunting him, a Russian. Kuryakin was on the verge of turning the Cold war into very warm soup.

“How many agents have we on this affair?” asked Waverly picking up the ringing phone.

“Thirty, sir. Napoleon, this is past a joke, we have to catch him,” Slate said noticing the small smile ever present on Solo’s face.

“That maybe too late!” said Waverly replacing the phone less than gently. “He has gone too far this time and the whole situation has been taken out of our hands.” Waverly sighed as he turned the television to the BBC and an on-the-spot news broadcast.

There was no need to listen, nor for any close-ups, Solo knew it was him. He knew of only one man who would dare to fly like that.

“I don’t know the plane,” said Solo ducking as the fighter flew under Tower Bridge.

“It is ours…” Waverly again reached for the phone and spoke in subdued tones before replacing the receiver. “Its existence will be announced by the President tomorrow or rather the A-11 will be announced. Kuryakin has stolen the A-12 Oxcart spyplane from a secret base here.”

“Well that’s nothing to do with Sweeney.”

“CIA developed, Mr Solo, yes, I’m afraid another Sweeney and I must inform you that MI6 have called to tell me Kuryakin is under a Burn notice.”

“Burn?” asked Solo.

“They must, Napoleon, he’s endangering the whole clandestine world, us included, he has to be removed.”

“*No!* Mr Waverly, you can’t allow it!”

“Mr Kuryakin has become a threat and we believe he is working for Thrush. It is out of my hands.”

“I can’t let you kill him…”

“Do you wish to hand in your credentials?”

“No, well, yes, Sir. All I ask is that you give me a week to find him.”

“Let MI6 do it. Take them about an hour…” Crawshaw’s bitter sentence was interrupted by Waverly, perhaps to prevent the first assassination within U.N.C.L.E. headquarters by two very angry agents but most likely because at that moment he too felt like strangling Crawshaw. “You are right, Mr Solo, we should do everything we can to assist that young man.” One hand reached into his beautifully carved humidor while the other reached for the phone. There was no need for him to raise his voice, his undoubted authority worked without that and only a few minutes later he turned back to Solo. “You have twenty-four hours to find him. Do what you can to help him. Bring that young man home.”

Tracing him was simple. The sonic boom created by the Oxcart was reported by frightened locals and mapped by the military. Sightings of the plane were finally lost near a small historic town, Kuryakin however, was still being tracked by the local radar. A small group of locals leaned against a black and white flint wall, all held a brimming pint of dark beer and most smoked what looked like home grown cigarettes that stuck permanently to their lips and required constant lighting. Solo wondered what the drug squad would think of the foul smelling substance that oozed green smoke.

“You City folk looking for the foreigner?”

“He spoke to you?” asked Slate taking one of the thin cigarettes offered by one of the men.

“Dint have ta speak ta know he was foreign. He aren’t from here so he foreign. Like what you is.”

“Where is he…” Slate broke into a fit of coughing and Solo thumped his back until he managed to take a deep enough breath to return his colour to normal.

“What is in that?” he choked throwing the cigarette to the ground.

“Magic mushrooms, boy. City folk, what do they know!”

A raised eyebrow from Solo asked for an explanation. “Don’t worry, Napoleon, there are small mild hallucinogenic mushrooms growing on the beaches. I will see a few pixies that is all.”

“So, the foreigner,” said Solo preventing Slate from slapping the imaginary fairy that had alighted on Solo’s head. “Where did he go?”

“Lowestoft, boy. Want a drag?” he asked offering Solo a cigarette.

“No, er, no thank you. Which way?”

The local radar pointed east and Slate shouted, “I’ll catch it!” and ran off amid laughter to catch the rhinoceros he had noticed entering the market place.

The smell of bad fish did nothing to settle Slate’s stomach as they searched the docks for Kuryakin. The Lowestoft locals had spotted him the instant he entered the town and small children had followed the stranger in the hope of a handful of coins.

“I see him!” shouted Slate.

“Not the same *him* as you saw half an hour ago is it?” smiled Solo remembering the race across piles of fish-heads to arrest a small mop.

“The drugs have worn off, honest, Napoleon.” He ducked behind a large wooden crate and pointed towards a large fishing boat emblazoned with

Russian lettering. Standing next to the boat was their quarry pointing a gun in their direction.

“Don’t move, Napoleon!” said Slate grabbing Solo and pulling him back while at the same time Solo slapped the gun from Grawshaw’s hand.

“He won’t hurt me!” he said moving closer to the Russian. Although he was confident that Kuryakin wouldn’t shoot to kill he was taken aback by the look of pure hate on his face.

“Illya!” he shouted and stood his ground as the gun was aimed straight to his heart. “We can help you, Illya!” Kuryakin began to back up the gangplank and Solo knew instantly what was happening and took one step backwards.

“Ok, Illya, it’s ok, go home.”

Slate took one long deep breath as he realized they had lost the battle and stood on Crawshaw’s hand as he grovelled on the ground for his gun.

“One thing, Illya, please before you go we need to know what is Risen Foam?”

Kuryakin looked around fear or anger glistening in his eyes and took one more step to freedom.

“For me, Illya,” voiced Solo. “Risen Foam and the Sweeney, we need to know.”

“Moozikant.”

“Musician? Which one, Illya?”

“Moozikant,” he said jumping on deck just as the final line was cut loose and the boat began to pull away from the dock.

“Dasveedanya, Illya,” said Solo sadly.

Chapter 7
June the 2nd

Things didn’t turn out how the agents had hoped. April Dancer’s associate was killed and Slate was immediately sent to give her backup. Solo and Crawshaw were sent to Russia to help a scientist defect and the mission proved harder and longer than expected. Completing Kuryakin’s mission took second place.

Every corner and each crowd held the same expectation for Solo. This was Kuryakin’s land and it was possible that he was here, hidden among people or sitting alone in some back street coffee house. Dark eyes watched for a flash of blond hair at every opportunity. Frequently Solo longed for the comfort of New York, for the fashionable ladies, anything to take his mind off a lost Russian and the constant reminder that all U.N.C.L.E. agents are expendable.

“…So you agree that we make the perfect team then?”

“Hu!” said Solo

“I have been telling you about this mission and why…”

“Just a minute, Crawshaw. Yes, Mr Waverly?” In all his days as an agent Solo had never felt so relieved to hear the sound of a communicator.

“I am sending two agents to take over from you and Kury… Um, Crawshaw. I have reason to believe that you may be placing the scientist at risk just by being who you are.”

“Sir?”

“The boat assigned to you for transporting him to England has been attacked with the loss of three lives…”

“Then we go with plan B and go across land until…”

“You fail to see the significance. The agents killed were MI6 and MI5. The Sweeney, Mr Solo.”

“Illya, Sir?”

“I’m afraid he has been photographed in England at the location of the fishing boat and many other government sites. This killing has heightened the Burn notice.”

Off Broadway

“Your incompetence allowed Kuryakin the freedom he needed to continue his role as one of the most deadliest agents we have known in a long time,” growled Waverly.

“I thought he was going home,” said Solo

“And you failed to check that he did not get off at the next port?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Ahem! Somehow that young man knew your every move. Luckily one agent managed to raise the alarm and the boat was prevented from sailing. Whether he was after you or the scientist we will probably never know…”

“He wouldn’t hurt me, Sir.”

“Are you so sure? If he was assigned to kill the scientist—and you were assigned to prevent him being killed—who would kill whom first?”

All Solo could do was shake his head, he had never been in that situation when both men were on different sides. He knew that, for U.N.C.L.E., he would kill whoever stood in the way of what was right, but could he kill Kuryakin?

“This situation is out of my hands. I have set up a meeting with the one person still on our side; see what you can do to calm the matter. You are to meet SIS at Broadway. When you are asked what you purpose is in traveling abroad, you will answer, to see the Gamekeeper. That is all, Mr Solo.”

Handing Solo a small brown envelope Waverly coughed, turned and removed a small speck of dust from a map on the wall.

“How did you get to be top agent when all you do is disobey orders?” muttered Crawshaw.

“Eat your sandwich and learn,” said Solo as politely as the occasion would allow. Steady rain beat down on the two as they sat in St James’s Park and while tourists ran for cover Solo casually threw another piece of flat white bread to the starving pigeons.

“Waverly told you to meet Sis at Broadway and *low*! Here we are in England—*again!*”

“I *said*, learn. One of the first things to learn is, what does Waverly mean? To be number one, top smart guy like me you have to understand his code.” He pointed towards a building and a road sign and smiled. “I’m going there.”

“Queen Anne’s Gate?” Crawshaw said re-examining a small street map that had become as limp as his uneaten sandwich.

“Next door, number 54 Broadway, the passport office,” Solo stood, flicked raindrops off Crawshaw’s saturated hair, smiled and walked slowly and purposefully towards SIS.

“What about me?” shouted Crawshaw.

“Eat your sandwich and learn.”

Cambridge, the sixth man?
Within SIS (MI6)

It was like stepping back in time with the only clue that he was indeed in the Sixties being the brightly dressed youths silently waiting their turn. It was one of those places that called for silence, one whisper seemed to bounce off the walls and magnify which caused everyone to stare at the offender. Solo sniffed the air and coughed, bees wax, woodworm and mould. The building was old, dingy and well passed its sell-by-date.

“May I help you, Sir?” The girl at the deck adjusted her glasses so that they perched on the tip of her nose and she stared impatiently over the top of the thick rims. He wondered about this prim young lady with her high cut starched white blouse and tightly pulled back hair. When the bell rang for the end of school did she free her imprisoned hair, loosen her blouse and run barefoot in the park?

“*Sir*! May I help you?” No, he decided as all in the room quivered at the sound of her voice.

“I need to renew my passport—please, Madam!” He handed her a letter and passport which she thumbed through with no change of expression.

“And what is the purpose of your visit, Mr Solo?”

“I have to see my gamekeeper.”

“Through that door, Mr Solo…” As she so dispassionately gave directions Solo found himself disappointed. He had somehow expected some kind of reaction once she realised who he was.

For a brief moment he felt claustrophobic in the warren of wooden partitions and slightly anxious when entering the elevator. He wondered if this was the first elevator ever installed in a building, and winced at the sound of the heavy gears as they strained to make the iron death-trap reach the next floor. With relief he folded back the large ornate safety doors and stepped down to the floor.

Light from the frosted glass window broke into a hundred multi-coloured dancing images over the paneled walls and heavy desk. A man who bore a striking resemblance to David Niven signaled him to enter.

“Please, sit down, Mr Solo.” Taking a chair Solo suddenly felt at ease watching the Gamekeeper reading a small report. He was impressed by his obvious charm and immaculate dress sense. He was totally unprepared for the next moment.

“Kuryakin is Russian?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And he was at Cambridge?”

“Just hold on a minute, recruiting was in the thirties,” said Solo standing.

“Sit please. He was also seen at the Joint Services Language School at Cambridge.”

“*We* recruited Illya.” His blood began to boil. He couldn’t think how many times this kind of questioning happened and how many times he had

to defend Kuryakin. If something occurred, Kuryakin was Russian, Kuryakin must be involved. The language School had been a known recruiting center for the Soviets.

“He was there yesterday. Two agents, one of mine and one of yours were beaten and had their heads shaved by what they describe as a man bent on murder.”

Illya is a phantom shaver? thought Solo.

“He’s been seen with Kim.”

“Kim?” queried Solo playing innocent.

“Have you ever heard him speak of meeting someone called Stanley?” Solo just sighed deeply already knowing that Kim and Stanley were one and the same. He knew he was the third man of the Cambridge spies.

“I trust Illya.”

The gamekeeper handed Solo a small battered photograph which clearly showed Kuryakin with Philby.

“And now do you trust him?” asked the Gamekeeper.

“With my life.”

“In that case, Mr Solo, for the sake of U.N.C.L.E. I hand you the burn notice.”

“You want *me* to kill him?”

“It is believed that he is trying to destroy this organisation and many more including yours. He has stolen a secret plane, found his way into the Queens private rooms, removed staff from Downing Street and killed many of my men. The agents tracking him tell me he is like a fox with rabies. Those who have got near enough to remove him have instead been removed. I give you the chance to either remove him or bring him back into the fold. Good day, Mr Solo, you have one week.”

Chapter 8
“Talk to Joe the Lawyer.”

“One hour. My turn, Napoleon.”

Although Solo sighed deeply he pulled the car over to allow Crawshaw to drive. He decided it was far better to go along with the young man’s wishes than start an argument that might drive the partnership further into the ground. Crawshaw went by the book at all times and one hour driving was a written rule never usually obeyed. Off duty he was different. He was a young man let out of school and constantly tried to gatecrash parties and entice the fairer sex to a convenient hotel. Despite his good looks he possessed none of Solo’s charm and his advances were frequently answered by a slap in the face from an insulted beauty.

“So, he was last seen torturing a customs officer at this airport. Just goes to show how bad the Secret Service are. How did they miss for goodness sake?”

“Open Channel D, Slate please,” said Solo constantly scanning the buildings around the airport.

“Slate here, Napoleon. I have a few weeks medical leave…”

“Bad mission, Mark?”

“Bad temper, Napoleon. A pretty girl took offence and slammed the car door resulting in two broken fingers on my gun hand.”

“Perhaps we all should’ve been issued with Illya’s ambidextrous nature.”

“I will be flying to London tonight and spend the holiday finding Risen Foam. Take care out there, Napoleon, you’re up against the best.”

“Not quite, Mark, no not quite.” Solo smiled for a second then a frown crossed his brow. This was going to be a battle to remember, partner against partner, friend against friend, the number two agent against the number one. Both of them knew the others tactics and almost their thoughts.

There was no time to move. The only warning that Solo had was the crash of glass as a high-powered bullet entered the passenger side window.

“Charming,” voiced Crawshaw flicking glass off his legs but his moan went unheard, Solo was busy punching in numbers on the car-radio as outside became a battle zone. Previously unseen agents fired volley after volley towards a small figure on a hanger roof.

“Cease fire! Cease Fire!" shouted Solo into the handset.

“And *you* are?” answered a voice through the crackle.

“Napoleon Solo from the United Network…”

“Oh, yes, heard of you. Nether-the-less that man is sanctioned Mr Solo…”

“And *I* have the notice, you are to stand down immediately Bill and Ben.”

“Yes, Sir,” was the mumbled reply.

Solo watched as the small figure scrambled to the ground and run to a battered car. He heard the engine roar and smiled, the banger was tuned up Kuryakin style and a cloud of dust was all that marked the place where the car had been.

“He nearly had you, Napoleon!”

“Do you think? Watch *your* back, Crawshaw.”

The locals at the small Inn had plenty of information to give and each time Solo bought them more drinks another story was told. How the Vicar stopped the German invaders by hitting the leader with a large bell. The day ten years before when the floods came and how now they were ready for the next one. The tale of Old Shuck and how the devil dog haunts the area foretelling death and disaster.

“What about the blond stranger?”

“Your round an’t it?” Giving up was the only thing to do. Either the locals really knew nothing about Kuryakin or he’d already got to them with some promise or other, they weren’t going to tell anything.

Disappointedly Solo walked back to the car.

“Who’s turn is it, Crawshaw?”

“Mine,” he whistled an annoying little tune as he opened the car door then managed a gasp as Solo slammed him to the ground.

“Did you lock the car?” asked Solo.

“Yes.”

“Then how come you opened it without the key?”

“You think the Russian?”

“I *know* the Russian! Check under your seat and go very carefully.”

Slightly puzzled, Crawshaw obeyed and after what seemed an age gently removed the small bomb.

“Pressure activated, sit on that and goodbye us,” said Crawshaw giving a sigh of relief.

“Goodbye *you*. Just enough explosive to take out the driver,” said Solo. “That's twice now and if you hadn't stretched in the car earlier he would have shot you.”

“The bullet came through *your* window!”

“And was *aimed* at you,” said Solo scanning the nearby fields for any sign of activity. Then facing towards a small wooded area he shouted, "Illya! Try to kill this man again and I promise you I will retaliate! Illya! Show yourself! He is my partner, you don’t touch!” This time it was Solo’s turn to hit the ground as Crawshaw dove on top of him. Bullets kicked up mud as they slammed into the ground around them.

“That blasted Russian!" shouted Crawshaw rolling to the dubious protection of the car.

“Sniper!” answered Solo pointing towards flashes from a nearby haystack. “Illya’s in the woods, the *opposite* direction.” Again he shouted into the car radio. “Cease fire! Bill and Ben, the burn notice is *mine*!”

“That’s not us, Sir!” a confused voice answered.

Solo watched helplessly as bullet after bullet cut into the trees where he knew Kuryakin was hiding. Every time he moved to aim at the mussel flashes in the haystack Kuryakin opened fire on him and Crawshaw. They were helplessly pinned down. As Solo began to belly crawl to a safer position Crawshaw’s gun spoke loudly next to his ear and was instantly knocked from his hand.

“Do *not* fire at Illya!”

“But he’s trying to kill us!”

“He’s keeping us pinned down. Believe me we are full in his sites and if he wanted us to be we would be dead. For some reason he doesn’t want our…”

A massive explosion ripped the air as two twelve-bore shotguns were discharged behind Solo showering him and Crawshaw with skin numbing lead pellets. The acrid smell of gunpowder hurt their nostrils just as the

noise had their ears. Smoke began to curl upwards from the haystack as two men fell to the ground.

“Best call the fire-brigade out,” said one of the owners of the guns.

“Jack aren’t gonna be happy. Third time this week we set the hay afire,” said the second.

“Best call the undertaker while you at it,” added the first.

“Joe aren’t gonna be happy. Third time this week we needed to bury strangers.”

For more than five minutes Solo stood open-mouthed as the calm locals chatted among themselves as in the distance the ringing bell of the fire engine grew louder.

“You killed them!” he managed as a small red truck arrived and attached a hose to a convenient tap while a very under aged fireman continued to ring the shiny brass bell.

"Musician’s men. Don’t want them on my land. Nope, no way."

Moozikant thought Solo remembering Kuryakin’s words. “You know of the Musician?” asked Solo his hopes beginning to rise.

"Yep, bad lot that one. From the City, you know?"

"The blond stranger told you about him?"

"Him? Got the wrong Musician, boy. Our one is a woman. Her is a goddess, so they say. Traps city men and makes them do what she wants."

"Illya, your blond stranger told you this? He spoke in English?" asked Solo his hopes high.

"The little Russian? No, he don't talk like what we do. We know her, nasty piece of work that one."

With his hopes dashed Solo questioned about the Musician.

"An't got time to talk to you, boy. Spent too long drinking. Got cows to milk. You should talk to Joe the lawyer."

"I thought Joe was the coroner?"

"Coroner? What's one of then when it's at home boy?"

"He means undertaker," answered Crawshaw.

"No! City folk don't know nothing. Joe's the lawyer. If we get dead'uns then we call the lawyer. He makes it legal. Then we call Jack."

"The fireman?"

"That's it, boy. The fireman, undertaker and dentist." Solo made a mental note not to get his teeth fixed in this village and leaving Crawshaw to examine the two dead men he walked towards the pretty house owned by Joe the Lawyer.

Trivia:- The little red fire-engine pictured with Solo was used in many British film productions, including "Dad's Army". Some villages in the part of England where the story is set continued to use farm equipment, lorries and fire engines of this type well into the Sixties. The little red engine is still alive today and was not harmed during the making of the story.

Chapter 9
“All he lives for is revenge!”

“The instant I saw the Oxcart mapping the area I knew we could finally fight back,” began Joe.

“The plane is here?” asked Solo.

“Very well hidden and don’t ask where. For all I know you could be under her influence. You wouldn’t know. Illya is the only one I have known to fight back, the others, well…” Joe broke off and looked out of the tiny panes of glass that made up his window. He picked up a photograph, one of many that adorned the large wooden windowsill. Solo could only judge by the others what this picture portrayed. All the pictures on the flower-strewn sill were of children. Joe began to tell his story although Solo wasn’t sure if it was him that was being told or the photograph clutched lovingly in the man’s hand.

“At first we thought they were just city idiots when they bought the lower field, it’s marsh land you see. We never built there, just used it to graze the animals. But our flood defenses made it possible for these people to build. There’s a warren of underground rooms, each set for this terrible experiment that could end up by causing another war.”

“What experiment?” asked Solo softly as if he were frightened of breaking the still air.

“Brainwashing. It’s as simple as that and the experiment is working. Sometimes they go too far and the poor victim literally dies of shock but mostly you don’t even know it’s been done. Young Illya is the only one I have known who has managed to resist and he has given us the courage to fight.”

“Illya speaks to you?”

“I know that look. Hope is a wonderful thing but he has not started to recover. My father was Russian so I know the language well. Illya can tell me most things apart from where the Musician is and who she is. Somehow she has control over what he says. Remove her and the battle can begin.”

“We only have a few clues to her identity. I have an agent going back over Illya’s last mission…”

“And so far he has found nothing and I suspect he won’t. If he has had the treatment he will subconsciously avoid seeing what is under his nose. But he will be drawn back to her for more programming or so she can gain more information. At the moment he is probably working for her. Illya has told me he has tried to prevent agents going to her but some have been brainwashed too much and have no control.”

A deep frown furrowed Solo’s brow, Slate was working for *THRUSH*! It seemed an impossibility but things did add up. Slate had been in charge of Kuryakin’s safety. He was the one to have planned the route. This route took Kuryakin right through THRUSH owned ground and they were waiting for him. Slate had a small map area to search and so far had turned up nothing. He knew where Solo and Crawshaw were and if so then so did THRUSH. Was this why Kuryakin didn’t want them to follow?

“Anyone you know could be under her influence, even you, Mr Solo.”

The frown deepened, the two snipers in the haystack must have been there a while and therefore had him and Crawshaw full in their sites. Two THRUSH marksmen *not* having a pot shot at two U.N.C.L.E. agents? They couldn’t have missed. How would he know whose side he was on?

“Ok, you had better not tell me your plans. All I want to know is, those children?”

“They are kept at the farmhouse and are the children of this village.”

Solo sadly shook his head. Somehow those children had to be got to safety before any attack was made on the THRUSH Satrap. He needed to know what Kuryakin had planned, if anything. *Yes*! A full smile removed all sign of stress from his face causing years to fall away. *Illya is still U.N.C.L.E. The ten U.N.C.L.E. missions he was carrying and the Thrush missions are identical. U.N.C.L.E. and other organisations were guarding the Oxcart. Those that did the guarding were brainwashed into perhaps stealing it. Illya removed them and hid the plane.* Each mission Solo ran through could easily have been reversed to help THRUSH and Kuryakin’s interference had stopped the plan. If this was the experiment then America could be the real target. Brainwash staff at the Pentagon, get to the President who could antagonize other countries like Russia and *boom*, the cold war would become very hot.

“Tell me everything you know about the Musician, then perhaps together we can help Illya,” said Joe replacing the photograph gentle in its place among the others.

“Unfortunately we don’t know much. The place could be Rome or perhaps the musician is from Rome or Roman descent. The Sweeney which we at first took for being the law…”

“Did he say this word or did you suggest it? I say this because he has never mentioned this word to me.”

“At first he was angry at Mark Slate and called him the Barber, I suggested Sweeney Todd, you know? Quick shave, then turn people into pies? Barber of Seville?”

“In that case both are applicable. He did manage to say the word barber to me. A barber by the name of Sweeney perhaps? This would explain

Illya's nasty habit of shaving people. He does this all the time, sneaks up, knocks you out and shaves the back of your head."

"*Of course*! Mark had one of his haircuts, so have most of the agents at U.N.C.L.E. London I've been told. So simple, why did we miss it?"

"Anything else?"

"Only the codename he gave to his last mission, that of Risen Foam."

"I know that. This is another name for Aphrodite, the Goddess. Think hard, Mr Solo, you are blocking something out? I think you know who the Musician is. One other thing, don't trust Crawshaw, he is out to kill Illya."

"Did Illya tell you this?"

"No, I knew this young man. Ten years ago he was at a rally. There was a meeting of friends and family of those who during the war were captured and killed by the Russians. Crawshaw's father spent time at a camp in Siberia, this is where he died. Crawshaw swore that he would get so high in law enforcement that he could legally kill Russians. He's done this hasn't he? All he lives for is revenge."

Chapter 10
To catch a spy

Now he felt totally alone even though he knew that the people from the Village were on his side. The question remained, was he on *their* side. He knew that the Musician was in the area of Slate's map and that the location was just not being seen. Brainwashing would make it impossible for Slate to associate what was probably under his nose. It was obvious that Kuryakin couldn't destroy the Musician otherwise he would already have done so. Solo had a dilemma, go to London and find the Musician's base, order Slate to stand down and get another agent to cover the map area or find Kuryakin before the Burn notice was taken out of his hands.

The decision was simple, Kuryakin might be the only person able to resist the Musician therefore Solo must try to convince him that U.N.C.L.E. was still on the side of good so that once again they could work as a team. He knew his location now as in the thin dawn mist he had seen him slip from the cover of the woods and run across country. Solo smiled, the cold driving rain had vanished to be replaced by a stifling heat unusual for England, Kuryakin hated this kind of weather and hopefully would be slowed down.

I need a cigarette, he thought, then scowed as he realised that one, lit and half smoked was still in his mouth. Once again he tried to look at the usually dim light and again pain shot through his temples. The shadows it cast reached out to grab him with menacing claws as giant cockroaches tore at his flesh.

Slate moved whimpering across the floor and sat hunched with his back to the wall. Some form of sanity crept into his brain and he mumbled to himself to convince the small amount of sanity to stay. The empty cigarette packet crumpled in his hand and he thumped it hard on the rubbish strewn floor. *I feel as if I need a cigarette yet I have smoked one after the other. I need a drink yet the bottle is empty after a few minutes. I am missing, needing something that I usually have… Somehow I am an addict.* Brightly coloured lights escaped from cracks in the wallpaper and formed a vortex in the centre of the room as Slate tied his wrists to the brass bedstead. The desire to leave the room and head for what he knew would be his undoing was fast overcoming the diminishing sanity. *One puff of magic mushrooms was not enough to cause this terrible need. Somewhere, someone has given me a something that I need more of.* As monsters howled around the room Slate closed his eyes and waited for the agony of going cold turkey to pass.

Chapter 11
Storm Warning

“I’m *really* hungry.” Crawshaw mumbled for the third time in an hour. Even though Solo ignored him he was forced to agree with the young man. The vision of Roast lamb followed by strawberries and cream became stronger as they maneuvered though the mud laden field. He could smell and taste it. A thin laugh left him as he bent towards the lush green plants, crushed the leaves and inhaled the aroma.

“Mint!”

“Lamb,” added Crawshaw licking his lips and visibly drooling.

“Now we have to block out the smell of the main course and head for the dessert.”

“I want strawberries and cream.”

“That’s the other smell in the air, somewhere close is a strawberry field. I can guarantee that Illya will have headed that way.”

All worldly cares seemed to vanish and for the first time since their enforced partnership they laughed together as they gorged themselves on the large ripe fruit. U.N.C.L.E. disappeared and they became transported back to the carefree days of childhood as their lips and fingers became stained with the delicious juice. A distant rumble failed to disturb them as did the moan in the nearby trees. In the middle of the field the sun still shone, hot enough to blister fair skin and ripen more strawberries. Crawshaw stood to ease the pain in his back caused only by crawling through the fruit in an effort to better the record sized berry found and greedily devoured by Solo.

“Mortar!” he yelled throwing himself to the ground and murdering several hundred strawberries as he did. The thundering echo of the explosion still vibrated across the ground as Solo stood laughing and pointing at Crawshaw.

“What?” he asked scowling and trying to remove squashed berries from every piece of clothing.

“That, my clever agent was a bird scarer. Somewhere in this field is a large canon that fires an explosive charge to scare all that trespass, us included.”

Both men stood laughing like schoolboys as the canon sent another warning. Having stood, both men could see the predicament they were in, all around them black, fast moving clouds had formed and lightning began to flicker more frequently. Darker clouds seemed to be hanging too close to the ground. The canon boomed again and mixed with the crash of thunder as the gentle whisper of the trees began to heighten. Crawshaw only shrugged and bent to gain the prize of the biggest strawberry ever grown when the cannon sounded again. The strawberry was flattened as Solo threw him flat on the ground.

“*Now* it’s mortar!” shouted Solo as the boom turned to a high-pitched whistle. A large hole appeared a few feet from the agents covering them in mud and strawberry soup.

“This can’t happen in England!” shouted Crawshaw pointing at the clouds and diving to the ground as another boom announced yet another attack by the bird scarer and adding to his misery large hailstones dropped from the angry sky. The two men began to run as the wind picked up, the cannon boomed, lightening struck, hail bruised their exposed skin and three tiny tornados not much bigger than Solo picked up strawberries and hurled them at the men.

Once tucked up in the relative un-safety of a large prickly hedgerow Crawshaw began his unceasing yap although this time Solo listened and joined in.

“What God does that little Russian worship?”

“I was hoping this was coincidence but when I eventually speak to him again I will ask why he never used the wrath of the Heavens on Thrush before now, we could have used it.”

“And Napoleon, how do we explain to Waverly?”

“We lost Illya because…No, I think we forget it. What I will not forget is that that angelic looking little blond tried to blow me up.”

“Huh?”

“The bird scarer has been turned into a weapon of war by someone capable of tapering with such things.”

“Illya did that? I got to get him to teach me a few things when you eventually tame him.” Solo began to laugh then stopped, confusion stung his brain. The situation seemed to have changed. He had started to like the unlikable Crawshaw and begun to doubt that Illya would never hurt him. Crawshaw had started to speak fondly of Illya yet he had sworn to kill *all* Russians. Was this the brainwashing? If it was then what was reality? Pulling himself together and pushing all doubts to the back of his mind he signaled to Crawshaw that they would sneak around to catch Illya at the bird scarer.

It was no surprise to find that Kuryakin had vanished as quickly as the dark clouds. The sun beat down merciless on the two agents as they walked slowly into a small village. No sign of life could be seen and Solo wondered how people could be happy living in a place like this, picturesque though it was. No bars, restaurants, clubs or fashionable shops, just a small fish and chip shop, one lamppost and a newsagents that sold everything possible including maggots. Solo had just begun to think that the Musician had captured all the occupants when he spotted two men dressed in winter clothes.

“Storm comin.”

“Yep, you rite, storm comin.” They both muttered all the way down the small road until they disappeared into a larger building that could have been a church.

“Do you think we should tell them that storm been and gone?” asked Crawshaw laughing and raising his arms to the vivid blue sky. Although Solo wanted to answer and resume the schoolboy attitude the men had shared on the field he kept silent and eyed the village streets warily. He

always had a sixth sense when danger was concerned, some called it luck, but he knew now that he was being watched. He visibly jumped and muttered about his nerves being in shreds when a man and a rusty bicycle appeared from a tiny gap between two houses.

“City fool, storm comin. The bells been ringing.”

“Storms been,” said Crawshaw trying to imitate the man’s drawl.

“That were just the Henrys.”

“Henrys?”

“Baby whirlwinds they is. When I were a boy at sea I saw whirlwinds that were bigger than this town…” Solo interrupted before he had a full description of a tornado and life as a sailor then instantly regretted it, for before he could ask if Illya had been seen the man muttered something about ‘rude city folks’ and disappeared down another small cap between the houses.

“What did he mean about the bell?” asked Crawshaw then dropped to one knee and fired his gun. “There!” he shouted pointing to a small running figure.

“Crawshaw, don’t you even think about shooting him,” Solo warned diving behind a wall as Kuryakin returned fire.

Kuryakin held his ground, his gun fixed firmly on Crawshaw with the sun glinting on his blond hair.

“Illya!” shouted Solo lowering his gun and forcing Crawshaw to do the same. “I know you’re on our side. You can help us.”

“Neit!” he said sending a shot between Solo and Crawshaw.

“You are U.N.C.L.E., U.N.C.L.E.” A shot rang out again this time removing a small amount of skin from Crawshaw’s head and before Solo could prevent it Crawshaw fired in return. Kuryakin dropped to one knee, turned to look at Solo then ran unsteadily towards the nearby cliffs.

“You hit him,” shouted Solo angrily shoving Crawshaw against the wall and removing yet another piece of skin.

“I didn’t!”

“You tried to kill him!”

“Yesterday, yes I wanted to kill him, today, I don’t know. What I do know is I aimed wide, very wide.”

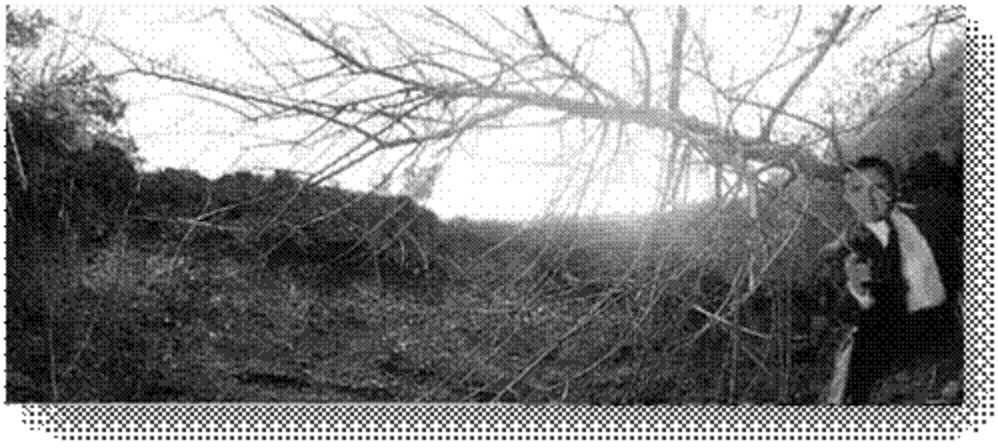
Again Solo was confused, usually he knew if someone was insincere, Crawshaw looked as if he was telling the truth, he appeared genuinely distressed that his bullet might have hit Kuryakin. Together the idea came to them that perhaps there was a sniper in the vicinity yet there was nowhere where they could have had a clear shot at Kuryakin. Solo bent to the ground and pointed to a small clump of blood-stained blond hair and glared at Crawshaw.

“I aimed wide,” he insisted then smiled as Solo picked up a small flattered bullet and pointed to a fresh graze on the metal lamppost.

“Ricochet! You are a lucky man because if I thought you deliberately…”

“I told you I aimed wide and I am the best shot in U.N.C.L.E.”

Solo was almost relieved that Crawshaw was back to being his usual bragging self it made him seem normal. He had more on his mind than contradicting Crawshaw about just who was the best, he could still see Kuryakin’s face that moment he had unsteadily stood up, he had held up a bloodied hand, nodded and smiled.



The path along the cliff proved to be more of a challenge than Solo had expected. The mud covered track was no wider than a man's foot and frequently sections vanished as the edge of the cliff slipped onto the stony beach below. Walking away from the edge was impossible as that side of the path led to an impenetrable mess of brambles that reached out and slashed anything that approached.

"He couldn't have come this way," said Crawshaw as a yawning hole appeared before him.

"Then where?"

"Do you hear that?" Crawshaw pointed towards the grey-brown sea. The wind whistled around them and a distant rumble of thunder began to move behind them, yet above all this was the muffled chime of a single bell.

"It's coming from the sea!" said Crawshaw.

"Must be a buoy out there somewhere. Wait, look there!" A well-dressed man was sat only feet away from them yet separated by a large cliff fall. His back rested on a precarious wall and his feet against a gravestone that hung over the edge. Large listening and recording devises surrounded him and pointed out to sea.

"Hello," shouted Solo.

"Why, hello there. Interesting isn't it? Did you know that this village hasn't lost one fisherman or boat because of this bell? They say it is the ghosts of sailors that come back to warn them of storms…"

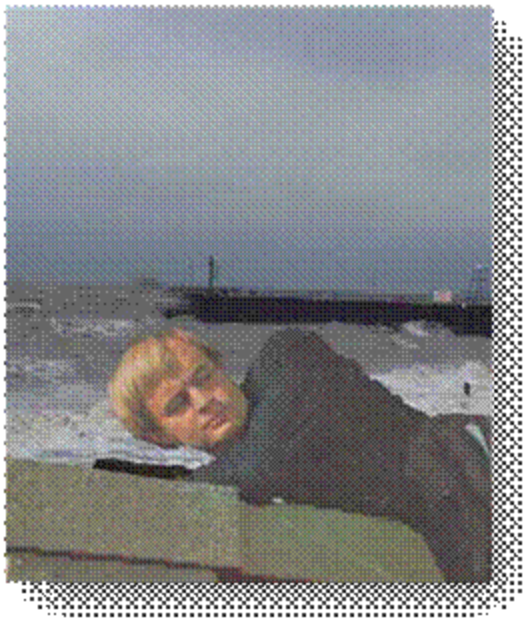
"And is it?" asked Solo finally interrupting.

"We doubt it, that's why we research the phenomena. There are seven churches down there. This gravestone is the last evidence of the seventh. The cliffs erode and take everything with it."

"And the bell?"

"We think it is resting on a rock and when the undertow is right, the bell rings. It works though as it does forecast storms."

“The sea is flat,” said Crawshaw eager to get on with the job of finding Kuryakin.



“Everyone in the village and the surrounding area are preparing. They say the sea will rise and a surge go up all the rivers. The last time it happened there was a massive flood.”

“Very interesting. Have you seen a man pass by you?”

“Blond? Oh, yes, he headed down.”

“Down?” queried Solo.

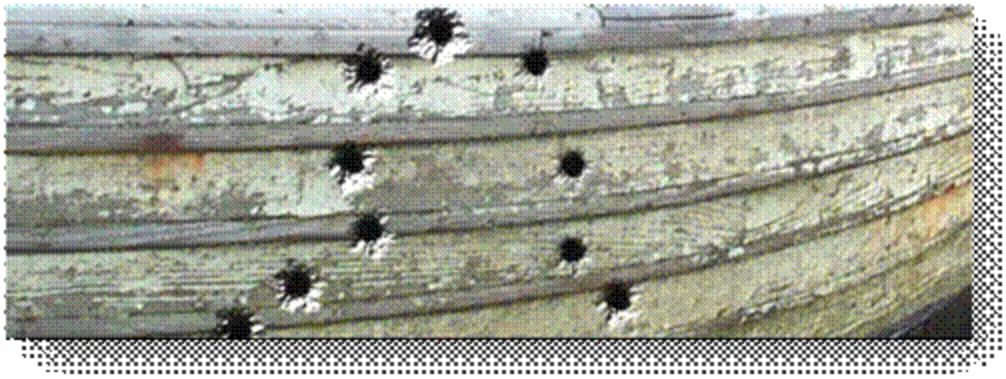
“That’s right. You have to go down to get along. Down to the beach, along, then up the cliff again to the safe bit. Weren’t you told? The cliff you are on is going to go at any minute.”

The rumble sounded again although this time they both knew it wasn’t thunder and they ran. With each step more and more of the cliff fell away taking with it chunks of the small path. Crawshaw managed on shout as he began to slide and he grabbed frantically for something to hold. He found only the brambles, which cut deep into his hand. Desperately he tried to gain a foothold and reach Solo’s outstretched arm, then to his horror Solo turned away, “Illya!” he said pointing to the beach.

“And me? Get me out of this mess!”

Solo smiled, reached down and grabbed the agent’s wrist just as the cliff edge gave way. It was so quick neither man had time to react and they fell towards the granite rocks below.

Chapter 12
The Deadly Game



More by luck than skill both agents landed on the only patch of sand on the whole beach but both had acquired several more bruises. Solo was particularly dismayed to find the knees missing from his trousers and two nasty looking grazes shining red through the holes.

“Solo here,” he said relieved that the communicator had stopped Crawshaw’s laughter.

“I need to talk, Napoleon.”

“Mark, I think there is a problem with that…”

“I must…”

“I’ll call back, Mark. I see Illya!”

They ran awkwardly across the gravel towards the boats where Solo had seen Kuryakin. Because of the storm warning the entire fleet of small offshore boats were pulled high up the beach and all showed the need for a new coat of paint. Looking at the disrepair Solo wondered why nobody from this village had ever been drowned; perhaps there were ghosts of sailors who protected them. Crawshaw fired the first round and was rewarded firstly by a bullet from Kuryakin’s gun removing a thin line of

skin from the back of his hand and secondly from the wrath of Solo knocking him to the ground where he banged his elbow onto a stone.

“Do *not* fire at him.”

Crawshaw watched in amazement as Solo ran towards a small rickety shed. There were no evasive maneuvers, his gun stayed at his side the whole time. Kuryakin was crazy yet Solo still seemed to trust him with his life. Then the situation turned from the sublime to the ridiculous. Solo sat down in front of the shed and faced Kuryakin who was only yards away with his back to one of the boats. Wordlessly Solo raised his gun and carefully aimed, Kuryakin did the same and simultaneously they fired. Both missed. Crawshaw began to run towards Solo and both guns turned towards him so that as he ran small stones were kicked up by the bullets pelting him and causing more numerous tiny bruises.

“What are you doing?” he yelled after managing to zigzag his way to flop exhausted next to Solo.

“This is a private fight, keep out of it!” Solo knew this was a ridiculous game, the kind of game sane agents would never play but he knew this was the only way. The game meant putting your full trust in the hands of a friend. Solo was putting his life on the line to prove that Kuryakin would, as he had constantly stated, never hurt him. He prayed he was correct or death would be inevitable.

For the next ten minutes Crawshaw watched as the battle became fiercer and an outline of bullet holes began to surround Solo.

“Clip!”

Crawshaw remained squatting on the ground with his gun resting on his knee, for he knew the instant he moved, two lethal guns would be aimed in his direction. He could only wonder if when these two so-called friends ran out of ammunition whether they would use the abundance of stones to throw at each other.

“Napoleon, why don’t you just use the tranquil…”

“Clip!”

“That’s the last one.”

Both guns fired simultaneously, spitting flame and death. In that instant Kuryakin jerked slightly as he was pushed back onto the wooden boat and his gun dropped to the floor.

“I said *don’t* shoot him!” said Solo pushing Crawshaw to the ground.

“I was *you*,” he said waving his gun in front of Solo showing that it didn’t even contain a clip. Kuryakin was on his feet gun in his left hand, he looked straight at Solo and ran towards the sea. The look he gave was of being lost and hurt, not just physically but mentally.

“We have a sniper,” shouted Solo.

“No we don’t. Napoleon, *you* shot him, there is *no* sniper and now we have *no* ammo.”

“Illya always used to say that in a snap shot I pull to the right. That wasn’t a snap shot, it was aimed to finish the right side of the outline.”

“So?”

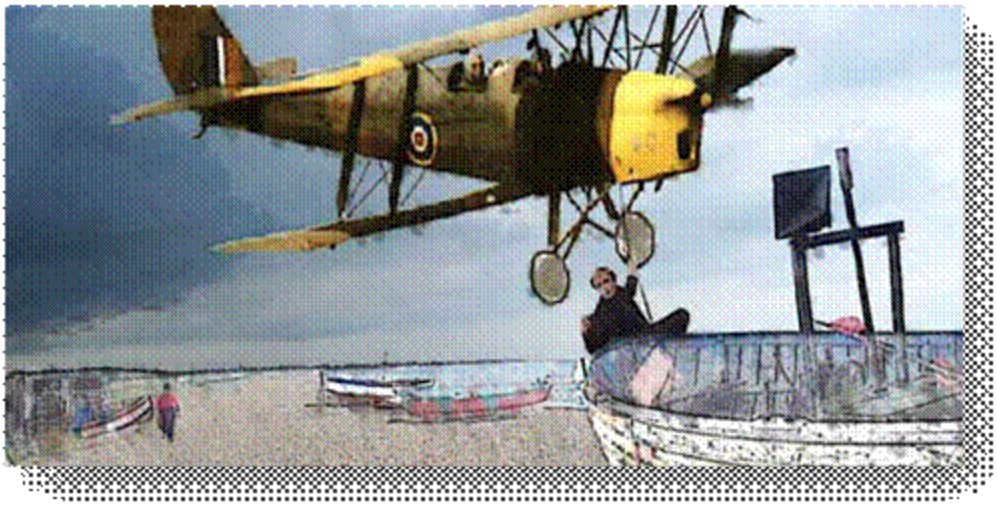
“Illya was hit in the right shoulder, that’s *my* left. I aimed right and even if I was wrong, I pull right. I didn’t shoot him.”

“What now?” Crawshaw asked watching Kuryakin standing with his back to the sea, lost and alone.

“I think I just lost us the game. I thought I could build his trust. You were right, I should have used tranquillisers.”

“***Get down***!” shouted Crawshaw as a small aeroplane skimmed over the top of their heads and headed for Kuryakin. With no ammunition between them all they could do was watch and shout warnings as Kuryakin stood his ground. The little plane dipped slightly and a rope dropped from the two man cockpit. As Kuryakin grabbed it with one hand the plane tilted dangerously and its cloth covering rippled in the wind. Then the engine gave a loud roar, stuttered then roared again and with Kuryakin hanging precariously on the swinging rope headed along the coast.

“We lost him!” Solo said sadly.



Chapter 13
Dance to the Music

Even the bustle and excitement of the City at night had failed to lift Solo's mood and despite everything Crawshaw tried to do Solo remained down. He regarded the whole mission as a failure and failing was not something he was used to having to face. His meeting with Slate was less than satisfactory for if what he said was true then nobody within U.N.C.L.E. was above suspicion including Waverley. Now, it appeared that all the people in London were at risk, turning against friends and employees. What if a pilot decided it was best to land his plane on top of the city? The Musician seemed to have the power to make people do exactly what she wished. And Kuryakin? Years of trust had gone with one foolish bullet. Solo replayed the whole scenario time after time and still he could not see how he could have been so far off with his aim unless it had been subconsciously and he too was under the influence of the Musician.

"We're going in," said Solo.

"Alone? If Mark is right then we are dead before we get in the door."

"We go in alone."

"Call for backup Napoleon or call Mark."

"Who do we call? Who can we trust not to shoot us in the back? Is Mark as cured as he says? Am I the danger to watch?"

“It’s all here isn’t it? Every clue in the book,” said Solo kicking at a wall as anger sent adrenaline soaring.

“How did every agent miss this?” Crawshaw leaned heavily on a blood red post box and watched the happiest street in London. People laughed and sang as dancers filled the road. Music, sweet and haunting drifted from the hidden speakers in a clear sign above the brightly painted barbers shop, ‘**Aphrodite’s… Roma Sween’**. Solo frowned, the essence of every street party was absent, the gentle laughter of children.

“I’m going in,” he said. Crawshaw kept silent, whatever was happening in that small shop must be stopped, but there was only two of them and no hope of any backup.

He swore softly under his breath fearing that even the air would hear him. Watching Solo and Crawshaw enter the shop made him long to charge in to assist them, but Mark Slate knew how pointless that would be, the temptation would be to great and he would once again be under her influence. The beautiful, enticing Aphrodite would once again spin her web, play her song and devour her mate.

Flowers emitted their sweet aroma and dancing lights raised Solo's adrenalin as he walked into the room. Just a normal fashionable barbers with normal looking customers having normal haircuts. The only thing that seemed slightly out of place was the atmosphere, pure happiness. Not one sour face could be seen.

"Napoleon, darling!"

"Roma," he replied mentally visualising her unflawed body and remembering how everything about her had been so perfect. He ignored the whispered remarks from Crawshaw, "You know her? How well?"

"Let me style your hair. And your gorgeous friend. On the house, naturally."

There was no harm in a haircut. With one hand resting on his gun Solo sat down smiling at the goddess.

Pacing, up and down, down and up. The path was hot, the air stifling. Small thunder- flies gathered in the thousands in Slate's hair, nipped at his skin. His nerves were on edge. Go in or stay outside?

Another warm perfumed towel was gently place over Solo's face. A feeling of ecstasy began to overcome him. All the worries, the chase across the muddy country began to ease slowly from his mind.

"I needed this," he whispered as soft hand caressed his forehead. "*Wait*! *No*, stop!" he yelled. "Crawshaw, get up! We are leaving! Rome! Roma!" Too late now he recognized the colored light at the corner of his eyes. The feeling of freedom, the wonderful lightness…

“You drugged me you…”

Backwards, forwards, up and down then finally courage and Slate stepped of the path and began to cross the street.

“Need help?”

“Oh, yes, I need help. We all need help,” murmured Slate.

“We can’t do anything here. It has to be… What is word that I am thinking? Their home base?”

“Who’s? Thrush?”

“Yes, are you coming or to stand and dream all day?”

“They have my friend…”

“My friend too. They will take him to the Thrush Satrap. Then they will apply nice friendly beat up tactics. We need to go now.”

“*Illya!*”

“Yes, Mark?”

“You are not trying to kill me? And you’re speaking *English*!”

“Why thank you. That’s the first time you ever said that.”

Slate smiled for the first time in a long while, but abruptly the smile left as he eyed Kuryakin. His arm folded across his chest and held there by a large safety pin. The bloodstained shirt and his paler spoke volumes.

“How bad is it?”

“Good, really good.”

“Illya?”

“Bullet is still in, but it’s good, really.

Chapter 14
War Division Kuryakin

“Something is different,” said Slate.

“There was a storm. The sea came in and claimed back more of her land.”

“Of course. Now, how do we rescue Napoleon?”

“And young Crawshaw,” added Kuryakin. “He saved me so I must return the favour.” On seeing the frown, Kuryakin told the incredible story of Aphrodite and Thrush’s new weapon. Their path to conquer the world began so simply. They bought the marshy land from people who would never guess what dastardly inventions and experiments would be undertaken in a small farmhouse. An underground complex was built then to prevent it from attack. Next the most terrible of deeds was performed. A festival was held knowing full well that in these small villages everyone would attend. A plane simply flew over and dropped knockout gas. All the children over five and under twelve were taken. The village was held to ransom, no one dared to interfere for fear of those innocents lives. Roma Sween had already gained the trust of many an U.N.C.L.E. agent having set

up a barber business two years previously. Within six months this was the place to be. Modern music and even live performers added to the atmosphere of fun. Parties, call girls and simply just being able to relax and chat made this a barbers like no other. When the drugs began to be introduced no one really knew, but Waverly had become suspicious and sent Kuryakin out to investigate. This was not unusual; any place that had a connection with U.N.C.L.E. was regularly inspected so the mission was only secondary in importance to his other work. Instantly however, Kuryakin became suspicious. He disliked the freedom within the building, agents seemed far too chatty and readily spoke of a pending mission whilst their hair was being styled. The perfumed scent frequently left Kuryakin feeling strange, as if he had indulged in far too much vodka. On reporting his suspicions to Waverly he had just received a tut and the suggestion that Kuryakin had been the wrong agent to investigate whether this was harmless fun or something more sinister. Kuryakin continued to watch, marking down each agent with a pending mission and sure enough, that mission was often compromised. Unfortunately he hadn't seen Slate using the barbers otherwise he would have immediately requested a different backup.

"The idea was to take out all the best agents in anyway possible."

"I see!" murmured Slate still angry that he had managed to fall into their trap. "Once U.N.C.L.E. had been depleted, Thrush would be free to influence world leaders."

"As is happening now, by various means."

"Various?"

"Once a person of interest to Roma and her band of thugs walks into the barbers a sequence of events takes place. Hot towels, containing drugs. Hair sprays, containing drugs. Tea, coffee, cigarettes all containing substances that cause complete ecstasy."

"Of course! All care is removed and talk is lackadaisical. In theory, a principal of a top school could give out all the answers to examination questions and little Thrush people could gain a pass without trying," Slate

said trying to remember just when the first time had been when he felt such joy about a hair appointment.

“They went further with you, Mark. Did you like the music?”

“Music?” Once again he thought back. He remembered the sweetly scented towels, expensive black cigarettes with the flavour of liquorice and then it came to him—a beautifully embossed headset—the special booth set-aside for Roma’s favourite customers and the music. But what was the tune, who sang the song?

“Were there orgies, Mark?”

“Illya, really! I think you should mind you own business.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Mark, you weren’t yourself at the time. Music was used to start with after first dose of drugs. A bowl was set out with brightly coloured…”

“LSD, purple hearts, opium…”

“And a small injection that you would never feel to keep you coming back for more. The music always turned into Roma’s voice, ordering, encouraging threatening and rewarding. Constantly singing inside your head until you knew nothing apart from her. This is why she has the name Musician. To sing you to death.”

For a while they walked in silence, sometimes negotiating roads that had become rivers and past houses that were completely deserted. Slate had noticed that everywhere seemed to be absent of people. The countryside had become silent in the aftermath of the floods, no dogs barked or birds sang, the only sound was occasional and distant. It was a sound he knew yet dismissed as memory, the distant memory of a Spitfire flying to hunt down the enemy.

“And you, Illya,” he said shaking the memory away. “How did they obliterate your memory?”

“So simply. One large dose of a hallucinogenic drug. A small amount of abuse, a few thumps. Then Roma inserted a radio at the back of my head. Two wires led to my ears. She constantly played a subliminal recording

telling me of the pain, burning, and smell until it became real. She told me that Thrush was good, U.N.C.L.E. bad. That I was a Russian who was hunted by everyone. I knew no other language. After I was released every time I mentioned a banned word…"

"Thrush, Sweeney, Roma, etc, I presume."

"Correct. An electric shock was sent straight to my brain. I learnt not to say those words. I somehow kept a memory that Roma was bad and remembered all the Thrush missions, so I took them out."

"How did it stop?"

"Crawshaw did a shot in a million. He struck the back of my head and surgically removed the radio. My whole memory returned in an instant."

"And the shoulder?"

"I can only talk to Solo about that!"

Slate smiled, there was a strange tone in the Russian's voice and he wondered if Solo had something to do with his injury. If he had, he was in trouble.

"Illya, we do have one big problem. How are two of us going to remove a large Thrush base, rescue the children, Crawshaw and Napoleon?"

"Two of us? Who said anything about the two of us? I have an army," he said giving a particularly annoying grin. "Mark, look up there."

Slate not only looked upward but down towards the marshes. Lush green grass lay across the whole field. The farmhouse stood in the middle. An unobserved approach would be impossible, THRUSH would gun them down before they got halfway across. Then he smiled and looked upwards again at the pole. At the top was a World War Two air raid siren, still in use as a flood warning system. He didn't need telling a second time, he climbed the pole and gritted his teeth as he turned the handle. The eerie wailing would be heard for miles across the flat unobstructed countryside and would call Kuryakin's army, whoever they were.

It seemed as if only a few minutes had passed when men began to appear, standing proudly next to their leader. Armed with shotguns, scythes,

hoes and ex-army equipment that had once belonged to both sides during the war. Bayonets, grenades, bazookas, all polished and in mint condition. Then the memory returned. This time Slate laughed long and hard as three Spitfires flew overhead, escorting two Lancaster bombers. A Hurrican dipped its wings as it flew over Kuryakin and two Tiger-moths skimmed just above their heads.

“An army? How many museums have you raided?”

“All the men here, um, and women,” he added as a very large lady ran past carrying a javelin. “All fought during the war. They won then. They have all decided enough is enough. They will no longer live under someone else’s rule. They will fight.”

“And us, Kuryakin.” Whispered a voice.

“*You!*”

“Us, as Solo would say, Bill and Ben.”

“MI6 wants to help *me*?”

“Your Waverly called the Gamekeeper and explained about this mess. Those two are going in to remove Aphrodite’s. Us two have been cleared because we have been following you for so long we can’t have been affected by Roma.”

“We hope!” said Kuryakin.

Trivia

The air-raid sirens mentioned are still used today along our coast line. You no longer need to operate these by hand, as all are under control of the Thames barrier. They of course can be operated in an emergency. The nearest one to me is two miles away and can easily be heard. The Lancaster, Spitfire and Hurrican still fly at air displays. The noise of their engines is still magic and all eyes go skyward. The Tigers fly very frequently from Cambridge and I have flown one.

Chapter 15
Sluicing

Flanked by Joe the Lawyer and Jack the fireman, Kuryakin gave them the shortest of briefings.

“Joe will take the ground team in…”

“Do-ya trust em, Ill-ya?” said Jack prodding one of the MI6 agents with the end of a vicious looking rake.

“No, Jack, but I would hate to be them if they step out of line,” he grinned and added to Bill and Ben the MI6, “Have you ever been stabbed by a rake?” Both men eyed the thirty, one-foot long prongs that made up the end of the rake and shook their heads.

“No fear, Illya. We are fully with you.”

The Spitfires made their first attack while MI6 and Joe’s team scattered and headed for the farmhouse. Carefully aimed bursts of bullets tore into the grass and kept any THRUSH agents within the farmhouse. It was a gamble, but Kuryakin believed that as the flood sirens were sounding all

important personnel would be underground in their safe, waterproof domain. Solo and Crawshaw would also have been taken there, leaving minimum guards for the children. Mass confusion would already be taking place, not everyday would they have encountered an army as fierce as Kuryakin's. The local people had even thought to alter their appearance by covering faces with blackcurrant juice and dying their hair with nettle and privet. The green haired, purple skinned beings even caused the MI6 agents to fear what they could be capable of doing. The Lancasters circled, dropping bombs of cow dung as close to windows as possible. The Tigers let off magnificent trails of blue smoke that would enhance the skins of the people and one little red fire engine pumped black water from one of the dikes and sprayed it over the doors. Within minutes the area stank so badly that everyone began coughing and three THRUSH operatives appeared at the window with white flags. The cheering was so loud as the children were reunited with brave fathers and grandfathers that Kuryakin had to wait for several minutes before the next orders were given. He didn't want to lose any civilian life so everyone was ordered back. Those carrying the children obeyed, but adrenaline was raised, they had been refused the kill, even jabbing with smaller rakes had been banned. Kuryakin compromised, one small group of war veterans would follow him into the base, the rest would surround the field to prevent anyone escaping. Everyone must remain clear when the 'air force' made the final attack, for this time real bombs would be used.

"You two, I can't remember your names," he said addressing the MI6 agents. "You lead my team. Capture all you can, but you have my authority to use lethal force."

"Illya, I don't know if you can do this. You are going to blow up, with large bombs, an English farmhouse and you are giving permission to use firearms in England without any backing from U.N.C.L.E.…" said Slate beginning to get very worried, an outbreak of war in England was going to be very difficult to explain.

"I'm already in this up to my neck. A few more illegally things aren't going to matter."

“That reminds me, Illya,” one MI6 replied. “The Oxcart?”

“It’s in one piece. I give it back soon, ok?”

Breaking the trapdoor with a stick of very old dynamite was easy and Kuryakin closely followed by Slate, Joe the Lawyer, Jack the fireman, Bill and Ben the MI6 agents and a host of assorted veterans began their decent into THRUSH’s den. Further down they split up with only Kuryakin and Slate heading deeper in the search for Solo and Crawshaw.

“Mark, they will have already begun work on Napoleon so you leave him to me. I know exactly what they will target with him.”

Although they didn’t have their usual weapons they were well armed and soon found out that they needed every bit of firepower. The walls shuddered very slightly and Kuryakin scowled. Joe the lawyer must have already got back out and as instructed ordered the bombers in. They had heard no gunfire which meant no Thrush had been encountered by the other team. This meant only one thing, they were below them, waiting. The worrying thing was that the bombs from the Lancasters were not getting through. THRUSH must have taken precautions and made the place secure from air attack. He leaned on the wall for a moment then sank down to sit on his haunches.

“Are you alright, Illya?”

“Well, not exactly. You know I told you my wound was ok? It’s not, exactly.” Slate quickly examined Kuryakin’s shoulder and shook his head.

“It’s opened up, Illya and I don’t have a field dressing.”

“It’s ok. I just feel a little dizzy. I’ll survive.”

Slate knew that Kuryakin was becoming weaker by the minute and that it wasn’t just from loss of blood. They were on familiar territory now, each step taking them closer to the room where Kuryakin had been tortured. Solo would undoubtedly be there but could Kuryakin take that final step and go into that room?

Another shudder across the building told of the bombers fruitless mission. If they managed to rescue their men they still faced the problem of how to eliminate those hiding deep within the safe walls.

“Illya, my sweet little boy! I knew you would come back to me!”

“Steady, Illya, we need her ali…” Slate never finished the sentence. In one moment, the instant he entered the room and saw Roma all trace of Kuryakin vanished. He once again became the deadly agent that Slate had taken back to U.N.C.L.E.. An agent speaking only Russian and bent on revenge. Before Slate could stop him bullet after bullet slammed into Roma and the THRUSH guards opened fire. Pushing Kuryakin to the floor, Slate returned fire and tried to calm Kuryakin. He had become a killing machine. Each bullet fired from his gun found its lethal mark until Slate finally knocked the gun from his hand. THRUSH had abandoned the room, their dead and Solo, in panic.

“Illya! Can you hear me?”

“Da.”

“No, no, Illya! Not again, I need your help!”

“Not again, what?”

Relief rushed through Slate so fast that for a moment all he could do was swear, then on seeing Kuryakin’s look of disproval he laughed, “Don’t criticize me, look around the room. I think a few swear words are better than your way of expressing anger.”

Kuryakin had already looked around the room and found one of the things he wanted, Solo.

“He looks a lot better than you did,” observed Slate once again relieved. He had expected Solo to have already been tortured to the extent Kuryakin had been. The only difference appeared to be total disinterest in what was going on around him. Whilst the bullets had been flying Solo hadn’t moved as if he was unafraid of being shot.

“Stay here, Mark. I need to talk to Napoleon. I know exactly what they have done.” Swaying slightly, Kuryakin stood next to Solo and shook his head. “She didn’t do that thing, Napoleon. Do you know that?”

“Illya, just go away!”

“Do you trust me?”

“Go away, Illya!”

“Look at me, Napoleon!” Kuryakin slapped him on the face to make him look into his eyes. At the same time he reached around to the back of Solo’s head and removed a device. For only a second he placed it to his ear then with surprising force threw it to the ground and stamped upon it many times.

“Now listen to my voice! Roma is dead. Only my voice is important!”

“Illya! Get lost!”

“In all the time you have known me, did I tell you lie? No! You moan at me for not being American with your—how you say? White lies? You say people not like me because I tell too much of the truth. Napoleon, are you listening?”

“Yes, Illya but I just want to be alone.”

“I will tell the truth now. Do you trust me, Napoleon?”

Tortured beyond belief Solo managed to look into the clear blue eyes. He knew deep down that Kuryakin had been through the same torture. He also knew he no longer had the will to live.

“I trust you, Illya.”

“That is good. They did not do this thing. You still have wick no matter what you feel or what she said. Wick is still good for dipping, ok?”

Solo’s eyes opened wide. He knew what they had done—then slowly the room began to clear, the pain vanished, the voice in his head vanished and he realized just what his Russian friend had said, “Wick, Illya?”

“Yes, he is not damaged.”

Now Solo began to laugh. Maybe from relief or perhaps because of the large blue eyes so innocently watching the whole world. Mainly it was joy that caused the laughter. He was still in possession of his manhood and Kuryakin was nearly in possession of English, both were cured.

“Now for next problem. Where is Crawshaw?”

“Problem solved! Down one flight of steps, first door on the right. Unharmed the last time I saw him,” said Solo leaning heavily on Slate. He realized as soon as he was freed from the metal bed just how weak his legs were and gratefully accepted help.

“And the next problem, Illya!” added Slate as the building shuddered again. “All Thrush personnel are hiding in this building. How do we get them out?”

“Problem solved!” smiled Kuryakin once again reading a sign on the wall ‘In case of sluicing, push here.’ “To the top quickly!”

“Crawshaw?”

“I’ll be back!” said Kuryakin running ahead of them. It seemed as if all trace of weakness had vanished.

“Jack!” he shouted as he ran from the ruins of the farmhouse. His team had been busy in his absence and after the first bomb-run on the farmhouse they had immediately begun clearing wreckage from the trapdoor, then retreated whilst the second unproductive run took place.

“Jack, where are the sluice gates?”

“I got you, boy! Not bad idea that one. Over here they are but you haven’t got the strength to turn em,” Jack yelled from half way across the field as Slate lowered Solo to the ground and frowned.

Running towards Jack, Kuryakin suddenly realized how breathless he had become and for a moment he stopped as the field began to whirl in front of him. Blood dripped from the end of his fingers and he pushed Joe the Lawyer out of the way.

“Let me see to it, Illya.”

“Later! I need to finish this job.” Fighting to keep his eyes focused he looked at the beautiful fitting on the end of a green pipe. It was painted the same green with large wheels painted red and gold.

“All ya do is turn that wheel and the gate opens. Can ya turn it?”

“No, Jack, that is your job. I have an agent to rescue and a button to press. Make sure everyone is off that field and have the Spitfires ready.”

“You can’t go back in!” shouted Joe as soon as he realized what Kuryakin had planned. “Ok, I know that look by now. But remember, Crawshaw first, button second or you have no chance.”

“Take care of Napoleon,” he said running back towards the ruins. Once he disappeared down the trapdoor Jack turned the wheel.

Joe’s words ran around his brain. He knew them to be true but now he had little choice. The instant he had returned he had been met by several THRUSH operatives in the same corridor. On seeing him they had turned back and ran. One, probably another high-ranking yob, began shouting. “Kuryakin in the building, kill Crawshaw!”

There was only one way to impede them. He hesitated only for a second, then pushed the button.

“What’s happening?” asked Solo as his senses returned and another Spitfire flew low over the ground raking it with gunfire.

“Rising!” shouted Jack.

“Thrush are coming out!”

“Mark, I asked what was happening?”

“Jack has opened the flood gates. Illya has opened all vents in that building. In a very short time it will be under water.” The field still looked green and dry. Only Jack’s constant yelling about the height of the water and several THRUSH rushing, wet, from the trapdoor told of what was happening underground.

Dark, stinking water was already up to Crawshaw's neck as Kuryakin reached him. Quickly he pulled the tape from his mouth and dove down to try untying his feet. The rope was already slippery with slime and Kuryakin's fingers had not the strength to remove them. Once again he swam around the room diving and searching for something to cut the rope. Crawshaw began to splutter as water reached his nose. Panic began to make him struggle which in turn tightened the ropes. Down again into the rising water and this time success, his hands grasped a shattered mirror. He began slicing into the ropes, frequently coming up for air and checking Crawshaw was still above it. Once his feet were free it then became a race against time. Crawshaw's hands were still tied to the wall and his face was under the water. Kuryakin hoped he could hold his breathe long enough to free him.

"Bottom two floors must be under."

"Where are they?" asked Solo pacing up and down.

"There's still time, Napoleon. Illya will do it."

"He will? How strong is he? How bad is that arm?"

Crawshaw coughed violently as he broke the surface and managed a smile of thanks to his rescuer. The water was nearly up to the ceiling and once again they had to dive to find the way out. Objects swirled around them, banging into arms and legs, tearing into skin. They moved only by touch, all remaining light had long since been extinguished in a colorful display of sparks. The stairs upwards only found by luck, they began to climb upwards towards freedom. Crawshaw continued along the final corridor with only a foot of air left. Finally a small glow of light and a

distant voice calling. He reached for the hand and was pulled through the trapdoor.

The cheer began and instantly faded into silence as Crawshaw began to walk across the wet grass.

“Where’s Illya?” shouted Solo on his feet now and racing across the field. Crawshaw turned, swore loudly and ran back.

“Crawshaw! It’s too late!” Joe shouted in vain and with the help of Slate prevented Solo from going after him. They backed up to a higher piece of ground as the grass finally disappeared under the water. Jack turned the wheel and the flow stopped.

Nature was the only one who could lower the water and that might take weeks. The sound of bells heralded the arrival of the police force, sent from the City some twenty miles away. With them came the Gamekeeper and Waverly accompanied by a few agents from both sides. They began loading the captured THRUSH into the back of a borrowed cattle wagon. Waverly said nothing to his surviving men, only acknowledging their presence with a nod.

“He’s got ’im!” yelled Jack pointing frantically across the darkening field. Crawshaw had appeared from nowhere and carried the limp form of Kuryakin.
“Medic!”

Joe ran to him and taking Kuryakin laid him gently on the ground. “It’s too late, Crawshaw. He’s been down too long. You were gone over twenty minutes.”

“No! When I found him he was still alive. He was in an air pocket and that was only minutes ago!” He collapsed exhausted next to Kuryakin while Solo, Joe and Slate began trying to resuscitate Kuryakin. A crowd gathered around and stood silent waiting for a miracle. The Lancaster did one more run, with its engines purring the wings dipped to salute their leader and it slowly flew into the setting sun.

“Out of my way, man!” a familiar voice said. A cane cleared a path through onlookers and he bent down next to Solo. He made a fist and thumped Kuryakin full on the chest and shouted, “Breath, man! That is an order!”

One long drawn out breath was heard. One long fit of coughing. Then the cheering obliterated everything apart from Waverly’s smile.

“Finally, he obeys an order. Keep up the good work, Kuryakin.”

“I doubt it!” whispered Crawshaw. “Joe, I know you, don’t I?”

“A long while ago, boy.”

“What you said then, about not all Russians being the same? You were right, most are worth saving and some are great.”

Riding in the only available transport to the hospital was not Solo’s idea of fun. Then he sighed with relief as the tractor and trailer pulled into an airfield. Waiting for them was one of the Lancasters, apparently on Waverly’s orders. He helped Kuryakin get aboard and then apologized.

“I just don’t know how I hit you!”

“Well you know the saying we all make mistakes?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Well you didn’t. By then I had my memory back and decided just to play games. I fired the gun— it hit the shed—it bounced off— and hit me.”

“You shot yourself?”

“Da, Napoleon.”